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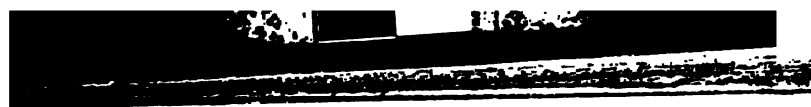
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THE BEST OF HUSBANDS.

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[FRONTISPIECE.]



"My own dear, darling Maggie, tell me that you will one day be mine!"—p. 15



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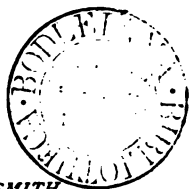
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THE BEST OF HUSBANDS.

By JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF "LOST SIR MASSINGBERD," "WALTER'S WORD," ETC.



A NEW EDITION,

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY J. MOYR SMITH.

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THE BEST OF HUSBANDS.

CHAPTER I.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

"WAS Milbank at the manufactory this morning, Maggie?"

"Do you mean John or Richard, father?"

Old Mr Thorne looked up from his occupation, which was that of engraving something very neat and delicate on a steel plate, and regarded his daughter with a look that was at once tender and grave. Constant intentness on very minute work had deepened the furrows which age had made on his bald forehead, but he was not, in reality, very far advanced in life. As he removes the magnifying-glass, which, while engaged in his calling, is habitually fixed in his eye, you can see how bright and blue it is, and keen as steel.

"How should I mean *Richard* Milbank, Maggie? Even when his uncle Thurle was alive, it was rare to see him at his post; but now that death has taken the old man, and Richard's interest no longer urges him to attend to business, it is not likely that he would do so from mere duty. I meant John, of course."

"John was at the factory, as usual," answered the girl

quietly. She, too, was engaged in the same employment as her father, and apparently so wrapt in it that she did not even look up at him, though the blush that had risen to her very brow told that what he was saying did not pass unheeded. She was of slight and graceful form, with sloe-black hair and eyes, and a complexion so very colourless that it suggested delicacy of constitution. It was no wonder that it should be so, for there was little fresh air to be got at Hilton, one of our great "centres of industry" in the Midlands, and the Thornes lived in the heart of the town.

Their house was a substantial one enough, though small, and not having any appearance of a shop in its outward aspect. Mr Thorne's customers were not the general public, but he served certain master manufacturers, among others, Matthew Thurle, now, however, lying dead at his little country-seat at Rosebank. His workshop was on the first floor, and had the aspect of a savant's apartment, rather than that of a mechanic—the walls being hung with scientific instruments of various kinds, and the tables strewn not only with articles of his trade, but with abstruse books, and papers full of calculations. The fact was, he was only a mechanic by necessity; by choice he was an inventor, and, as usual, he had suffered for his ingenuity. He found it difficult, even with the help of clever Maggie, to keep his head and hers above water—or rather, at the level, which, as it was, did but barely satisfy him. It was summer time, and the window of the back-room was opened wide, revealing a sort of arbour built upon the leads without, which a few inches of earth had transformed into a flower-plot.

"You look pale, Maggie, darling; come out into the air for a few minutes; I want to speak to you." The old man stepped out into this improvised garden, which, though bright with sweet-smelling blossoms, commanded no better view than the backs of houses like their own, and a broad, black space, immediately beneath it, across which flashed, many times in

every hour, with a roar and a rattle that shook the street, the trains of the London and Hilton Railway. It took a great deal of Maggie's spare time to cleanse this little Eden from the "blacks" and other defilements which the iron horse thus cast upon it; but with the help of a little hand-engine, constructed by her father himself, she contrived to do so. The garden on the leads was the wonder of the neighbourhood, and especially its arbour, over which the creepers had been so skilfully trained that it formed a very tolerable bower, secure from prying eyes. Here Mr Thorne took his seat; and after a minute or two, during which she employed herself in methodically putting away her work—either from force of habit, or in order to gain time to marshal her thoughts in readiness for the coming interview—his daughter joined him.

"When you were away, lass, this morning, I received an invitation to Mr Thurle's funeral. Did John speak of it, when you saw him at the factory?"

"No, father; not a word." Her tone was cheerful, considering the subject of which she spoke; and her air was one of relief, as though she had expected him to broach some topic more unwelcome.

"That was strange too," continued the old man, "since it was he himself who sent me the invitation."

"Then I think he ought not to have done so," returned Maggie quickly. "It was taking too much upon himself. It was taking for granted—for one thing—that his elder brother would be disinherited, and that he would be his uncle's heir."

"Nay, nay; you do John wrong—as you often do, Maggie. He wrote in his brother's name as well as his own; and there was no assumption at all about it. He did not *say* so; but my impression is Richard would have nothing to do with the matter at all. There is nothing more to be got from his uncle now; he has done his worst towards him, whatever it

is ; and Richard will not be at the pains to show respect for his memory."

"That is not to be expected, father. Richard Milbank is not a hypocrite, whatever his faults may be."

"Whereas John is!—Is that what your words imply?" asked the old man sharply. "In the case of any other girl," he continued, since she did not reply, "I should have expected no better judgment. John is too hard-working, too serious, too ascetic even (I grant that), not to suggest such a suspicion to light and frivolous natures ; but I had hoped you were more clear-sighted. I know he is thought ill of by many men, too, because he has become a teetotaler."

"That cannot be *my* reason, father, since I am a teetotaler myself," answered Maggie with a faint smile.

"You know what I mean well enough, my dear. It is one thing not to drink wine or spirits, and another to take an oath never to do so. John has taken the oath—in the case of any other man in his position, I should say, has foolishly done so. But he has been peculiarly situated ; he has had an example before him such as might have driven any man to such a step."

"I know that Richard takes more than is good for him, father," observed Maggie coldly ; "you need not tell me that."

"More than is good for him ! My darling child, you little know what wretchedness and ruin are hidden beneath that simple phrase. He is a drunkard : you may gloss it over as you will. Unless a miracle takes place, he will become—it is only a question of time—a hopeless, incurable sot. I would spare you if I could.—You shake your head, and smile ! Why, Heaven help me ! do you suppose that I am wounding your tender heart with words like these, to please myself ? It is because I am your father—the being who loves you better far than his own self and all the world

beside—that I am telling you the bitter truth. The surgeon's knife must needs cut deep as the disease."

"You were saying that John has become a teetotaler from beholding the spectacle of Richard's unhappy failing," observed Maggie evasively. "I say that was not the reason, father. *He* was not tempted to drink, and therefore needed no such protection for himself. He took the oath, that it might come to his uncle's ears, and contrast him favourably with his brother in the old man's eyes—though he needed not to do so, since he knew himself to be the favoured one already."

"You evade the question, Maggie, by blackening John—most cruelly and most unjustly too. But that is nothing to the purpose. Even if John were as black as you would make him, that would not make Richard white. Listen to me, Maggie—listen, for it may be for the last time!"

A distant thunder from afar had grown and grown while he was speaking, till it began to roar about them; the earth began to shake, the air to quiver, and presently the down express dashed close beneath them, and was swallowed in the neighbouring tunnel with a roar and a thud.

"So help me, Heaven!" continued the old man, pointing with his finger to where the wreaths of steam were curling about the tunnel's mouth, "I would as soon you should lay yourself in the path of yonder screaming devil, and be crushed by it, as that you should marry Richard Milbank. You see his faults, you think, and hope to cure them. That is how foolish women fling themselves after lost men, and are lost with them. I know the world well, Maggie, and believe me that is a hopeless venture. A man who at twenty-five has taken habitually to drinking—whose habits are idle—whose associates are wicked and debased—whose own fair fame has been foully smirched and blotched"—

"By whom, father?" cried the girl, rising suddenly from

her seat, and speaking with intense energy. "Do you count the report of mischief-makers and scandal-mongers as proof of the fact—for what else is there to prove it?"

"Common sense, Maggie. Look you—would you break off with this fellow, if you thought he had really done what rumour taxes him with? Or would you take him for your husband still, even as a felon?—You would not! Then you are not utterly mad, as I had feared. Well, I will prove his guilt, then." He held up one supple hand, and, with the forefinger of the other, checked off on it his facts and arguments. "The circumstances are these. An old man is lying on what is supposed to be his death-bed in a lonely house. There is a deaf housekeeper in the kitchen (the sick-nurse being gone home to the cottage for half-an-hour, as usual, to take her evening meal), and not a soul beside under that roof. A man with a mask on his face, and otherwise disguised, comes with pistol in hand into the room, and compels the dying man to sign—some deed; he knows not what; he only sees the words *eight hundred pounds* above the place where he is forced to set his signature. This wretch departs, having gained his object—and without taking with him a single article of value, of which there are many about the house. He was certainly, therefore, no common thief. Who *was* he, then? Who could possibly derive any benefit from such an outrageous act? One of two persons only it must have been—the rich man's nephews. The younger of these had already, as was generally supposed, been made his heir; no deed could make him better off than he was already."

"I never said John Milbank did it, father," observed Maggie quietly.

"My darling, let me finish. I am using that method of ratiocination which is called the exhaustive process, and I must have time. Of course, you never said so, nor did anybody else. John Milbank was in his proper place at the

factory, as a dozen witnesses could prove, at that particular time ; but he was not even suspected, for the reason I have already given. On the other hand, Richard Milbank was *not* in his proper place, nor at any place of which he could give a satisfactory account, at the period in question. It is true that nothing came of it, for, as it happened, Mr Thurle rallied, and lived for some months afterwards, during which he is said to have executed a fresh will. But the man who obtained his signature by force counted on his immediate decease, no doubt, and indeed he was almost the cause of it. Moreover, that man knew the ways of the house, and the hour at which the sick-nurse was wont to leave her charge ; and he also knew—mark this !—that eight hundred pounds was exactly the sum at that time standing to Mr Thurle's credit at his banker's. Now, who but two men in all the world could have commanded such opportunities of knowledge ; and who but one man in all the world had the motive for committing such an action ? ”

Here Mr Thorne brought one palm down upon the other sharply, in token that the speech for the prosecution was concluded, while, “Gentlemen of the jury,” his face seemed to say, “you will surely give your verdict of ‘Guilty’ without moving from your box.” In this, however, he was mistaken.

“You talk of motive, father,” pleaded Maggie, shaping letters on the sanded floor with her little foot ; “but what motive could Richard have in committing this crime, when he must have known that any deed that he might compel Mr Thurle to sign would, without the signature of a witness also, be mere wastepaper ?

“Ah, *you* know that,” responded the engraver quickly, “because you have had to do with papers and parchments all your life, and can engross as well as any attorney's clerk in England. But an ignorant man like Richard Milbank might

not have known it. Moreover, as to witnesses, he might find a peck of them, after the event, among his unprincipled friends. Do you think Dennis Blake, for example, would not put his hand to any deed or document whatever for a five-pound note? Ay, though it were one that sold his soul! No, Maggie! Your defence has broken down, and is none the better, let me add (as I heard a judge once say), for the reflections that you have cast upon another person."

There was a long silence. Herbert Thorne looked pale, and older by a year or two in that short hour, for he knew that he had not carried his point on a vital question. He was not only possessed of considerable scientific knowledge, but was in many respects a wise man. He had seen from the first the hopelessness of using any stronger measures against his daughter's passion for Richard Milbank than persuasion. If she would not give way to him, pleading as a father with right and reason on his side, she would certainly not have yielded to commands which could not be enforced. Maggie was of age, and quite competent to earn her own living by her pen; not as an authoress, indeed, but as a transcriber of manuscripts for the press—as an engrosser—as an engraver—and also as a painter of photographs: she had shown her neatness and dexterity in all these walks, and to some purpose. There were, in short, two skilled mechanics in that house. He was right, then, in using persuasion only; nor was he to be blamed for putting before his daughter the true character of the dissolute man on whom she had set her heart. Where Herbert Thorne was wrong was in praising John Milbank, whom he would have had her choose for her husband at the expense of his brother—in exalting him, as it were, upon the ruins of that broken man. She resented this as only a woman can, and it made her cling to the ruins.

Father and daughter sat in silence for many minutes, during

which another train—this time London-bound—rushed out from the tunnel, and roared past them. While the noise was still at its height—"Did I not hear the bell ring?" inquired the engraver, to whom the greater sound was so familiar as almost to pass unnoticed.

"Yes, father; it is Richard," was the quiet reply.

The old man rose from his seat with a hopeless look. That she should know his very ring, seemed to convince him that her love was fixed indeed upon this good-for-naught.

"Do you know what he is come for, Maggie?" said he bitterly. "He is come to ask you to marry him, because he knows that to-morrow he will be a beggar!" With that he walked hastily into the room and thence upstairs, only just in time to avoid the expected visitor.

CHAPTER II.

WRITTEN IN THE SAND.

MAGGIE rose, as if to follow her father, and avoid the coming interview; but, while she stood in doubt, a quick step was heard in the inner room, at which the colour rose in her white cheeks, and her bosom rose and fell tumultuously, in spite of the hand with which she strove to repress it.

"Why, Maggie, I thought you had flown!" cried an eager voice; "and yet, where should my pretty bird be found but in her garden!"

The speaker was a young man of five-and-twenty or so, and strikingly handsome; he was of medium height, and somewhat robustly made—the sort of figure which, unless its possessor is careful in his habits, is sure to develop into corpulency; his face, too, though fair and comely, was of that florid hue which soon grows to a deeper tint than would be chosen by a painter to depict even the healthiest complexion; his voice, though distinct enough, had already acquired that roughness which is associated with the constant use of stimulants. But his hair, which was brown and soft and curling, and eyes blue and tender as the summer sky, might have suited Apollo himself.

Maggie was not in the arbour now, but standing in the sunlight, with, for aught Richard Milbank knew to the contrary, a hundred pairs of eyes regarding her from the surrounding houses, and yet, had she permitted him, this audacious young

fellow would have kissed her then and there. She stepped back, however, from his embrace, and held her hand out, not so much in greeting as to keep him at a respectable distance.

"Why, Maggie darling, what's the matter?" inquired the visitor, a little discomfited by this rebuff. "Come into the arbour, dear, and tell me why you look so cruel."

"I can tell you here, Richard, quite as well," answered Maggie, as coldly as she could. Apollo had already dazzled her, in spite of those recent warnings, and of her own resolve, made but a minute ago, that she would *not* be dazzled. She had but just determination left to decline his invitation into the arbour, in which retreat she knew he would have got the better of her at once.

"I am not cruel, Richard, nor even cross; but I am much displeased to see you in coloured clothes, with the only relative but one you have on earth lying dead in his coffin."

"I am sorry it frets you, Maggie; but I can't wear black for a man like Uncle Thurle, who had never a good word for me, nor a good wish."

"Don't say that, Richard, for I'm sure it is not true," answered the girl rebukefully. "His manner may have been unpleasant to you"——

"Gad, it was!" broke in the other, with a contemptuous laugh.

"But he certainly did not wish you ill, Richard; far from it. If he could have seen you more diligent in business, and dutiful, and steady"——

"I beg your pardon! I thought I was addressing Maggie Thorne," interrupted the young man apologetically; "instead of which it is her father, it seems, who is giving me one of his admirable lectures!"

"It would have been better for you to have listened to them, Richard; but you will listen to nobody."

"Yes, I will, Maggie; I will listen to *you*—when you are

speaking, that is, in your own proper person ; and what is more, I will obey you."

"Then you will get mourning for your uncle's funeral to-morrow, and wear it."

"To hear is to obey, Maggie ; it shall be done. I know an establishment at which discreet young men deal for ready money, where ready-made clothes are to be bought. I will go, not to its 'mitigated grief department,' but to its 'most inconsolable woe ditto,' and furnish myself with a suit of sables. It will go against the grain with me, I promise you, but it shall be done. The length of my hat-band and the depth of my weepers shall shame John himself. If crocodiles' tears could be purchased, I would even shed them to please you ; but I have reason to believe that my brother has bought up the entire stock.—It was about to-morrow that I have come to speak to you, Maggie," added the young fellow, dropping his light tone, and speaking with emotion. "In four-and-twenty hours my fate, you know, will be decided."

"Indeed, I do not know it, Richard. Men's fates are decided for them, as I believe, by their own conduct ; else what would be the use of fighting *against* fate ? Supposing even that your uncle should leave you nothing"——

"A very reasonable supposition indeed, Maggie ! That is, I suspect, exactly what he has left me—bating some excellent advice, and perhaps a shilling to buy a rope with, or a razor."

"I say, even in that case there is no need to despair of your future, Richard," continued the girl firmly. "You have youth, and health, and wit enough, though you waste it on flippant jokes."

"It is her father !" mused the young man gravely. "That is his style beyond dispute, yet I never saw a man with such a pretty foot."

"Richard, you are incorrigible !" cried Maggie, beating

the praised foot upon the gravel impatiently ; "and I have half a mind to dismiss you altogether from my heart !"

"If you have half a mind to keep me there, that is all I can hope for," answered the other penitently, "and a great deal more than I deserve. O Maggie !" cried he, throwing out his arms, and speaking with passionate energy, "do you suppose I am blind to what I am and to what you are ? Do I need your father's arguments, or any man's, to convince me of the ruin that I have brought upon myself by my own folly ? It is the consciousness of all that that makes advice and reproof intolerable to a fellow like me. What is the use of crying over spilt milk ? What can the most reckless do, beyond giving his honour not to spill any more ? I do give it—I came here to give it—not to your father, who once told me he would not believe me on my oath—but to *you* ; I came to throw myself on your mercy"—they were in the arbour now, for he had seized her hand and drawn her thither, and she had not resisted. "I have erred and sinned ; yes, sinned, my girl, beyond anything that your pure heart can dream of ; but I repent me of it all. The confession is humiliating enough, and you will not make it more bitter, as others would do."

"Heaven knows I will not make it more bitter, Richard !" sighed Maggie, keeping him at arm's length still, and averting her eyes from his pleading face.

"'But is this remorse genuine—is this true ?' you would say," interrupted the other eagerly. "It *is* true—it *is* genuine ! I have made a false start in life ; or, rather, I have gone the wrong side of the post, Maggie, and lost the race that way ; but all this may yet be retrieved. If I had some one to love me, and to guide me, I am sure it would be retrieved. Your wise head would keep me straight ; your loving arms would restrain me from evil ways. I don't know what will happen to-morrow. The old man may have relented at the last, and

done me justice. If so, so much the better for us both. But if not, I have still enough to take us both across the seas—to America."

"What! and leave my father? Never!" She drew herself back from him at the bare thought. Then her father's parting words recurred to her remembrance: "He is come to ask you to marry him because he knows that to-morrow he will be a beggar;" and she once more relented towards her lover: he was incapable of a baseness, and she seemed to owe him a reparation for having listened to a suggestion to the contrary.

"You love your father, then, more than me!" cried Richard.

"I wish I did!" thought Maggie bitterly.

"Why should these old people for ever cross the path of youth?" continued the young man vehemently. "If my uncle would have permitted us to marry, all would have been well; and now your father is the obstacle.—Don't be afraid, Maggie" (for his passion was terrible to witness, and she shrank before it); "it is my love for you that makes me wild. I came to-day to ask you to be my wife, because I had so great a trust in your love that I thought, 'Even at this lowest ebb of my fortunes, she will not refuse me.'"

She shivered, and sighed, and shut her eyes. If women had been the chief customers of the house of Thurl & Co., Richard Milbank would have been the best man of business in that establishment, instead of the worst. He knew well that, with a girl such as Maggie Thorne, his very misfortunes would be the most eloquent pleaders for him.

"It is not much, indeed, that I have to offer you, Maggie," he went on; "perhaps nothing beyond a loving heart and these willing hands. They shall henceforth, however, work diligently for you, dearest, if you will let them. They shall be your bread-winners, if bread is to be won."

"I am not afraid of starving, Richard," replied the girl,

with a touch of pride. "It is not the fear of *that* which would deter me from becoming your wife."

"What, *then*?" inquired he quickly. "Is it the fear of my breaking my good resolutions? Will you not trust me? Will you not believe me?"

"I believe you, Richard: I am sure you mean what you say."

"But you would have proofs? I had thought that true love was more confiding;" his tone was sorrowful, and full of tender pleading, but the glance which accompanied it, and fell upon her down-drooped face, was impatient, disappointed, angry even. "Well, what matters?" continued he. "It is not as if I came to say: 'Will you marry me to-morrow, Maggie?' I only ask from you the assurance that you will be mine. Then, whatever change of fortune happens, I shall be content. Whatever may be lost, I shall still have won. My own dear, darling Maggie, tell me that you will one day be mine!—You do not answer!" cried he, drawing her closer towards him; "but your silence speaks for you as sweetly as any words! On the ground yonder I read your answer, too, which was written before I put the question." He pointed to the sanded floor, on which, as she had sat by her father's side, she had mechanically traced the letters of her lover's name—"R. M." "May I take my happiness for granted, love? Your cheek is white, but I will change this lily to a rose." So saying, he pressed his lips to hers, and she, with a low, soft cry, half-sigh, half-sob, returned his kiss. And thus they plighted troth. He would have repeated the pleasant ceremony, but that she withdrew from his passionate embrace.

"Go, Richard! go!" cried she. "I have done your bidding; your fate and mine are henceforth one; but you must leave me now."

"I am your slave, dear Maggie, now and for ever, and

must obey you. For the present, then, good-bye. Tomorrow may have good news in store for us, after all."

"Do not count upon it, Richard. Nor is it riches, even if you should be rich, that will make you happy."

"I know it, Maggie; for, rich or poor, I am now sure of happiness. But if the old man has relented, it may be realised at once. Think of that, sweetheart. And meanwhile, good-bye, my own, my very own!"

With a kiss snatched from her forehead, for she had covered her face with her hands, he left the arbour, and the next minute she heard the front-door close behind him. He was gone, and had taken her heart; yet well she knew it was not in safe keeping.

Her eyes fell upon those two tell-tale letters upon the ground, and she erased them, slowly and reluctantly, with her foot.

"Vows written in sand!" sighed she. "It is an evil omen. I have done wrong; yet how could I do otherwise? O Richard, Richard! I have given myself to you, in spite of my own heart's foreboding. Do not betray my trust."

CHAPTER III.

THE BROTHERS.

THERE are some natures that never count the cost of anything they can obtain on credit, but think only of the gratification of the moment; but this could not be said with justice of Richard Milbank; he thought only of his own personal gratification, it is true, but he sometimes looked forward to it a week, or even a month, in advance. He had come that afternoon, just as Mr Thorne had foreseen, while yet a chance of prosperity remained to him, to persuade Maggie to become his wife; and, if possible, upon the instant—that is, as soon as the law would permit it—to marry her. Of “saving common-sense” he had none, and even his wits (of which he had plenty) were rendered almost wholly useless to him, from his excessive egotism. Having decided upon some line of conduct conducing to his own pleasure, he did not give himself the trouble to place himself in the position of the person through whom the pleasure was to be obtained—an omission that forms the social safeguard of the world, which would else be at the feet of the Selfish. But even he perceived that to have put off his proposal until he was actually pronounced a beggar by his uncle’s will, would lay him open to some suspicion of selfishness. As it was, the meagre hope of his having been left something by old Matthew Thurle, was the rag with which he covered his shamelessness. He had offered himself to Maggie, whether he should be rich or poor;

"and what more," said he to himself, "could be expected of any man?"

He was very fond of Maggie—after his fashion: prouder of her, when she was present, than of any other girl in the world; but in her absence, her image did not by any means so monopolise his heart as to prevent it receiving other impressions. Those who were the most charitable to Richard Milbank's faults lamented his "extreme susceptibility;" others called him a dissolute and abandoned fellow. As to his protestations of penitence and resolutions of amendment, it would have been a compliment, to call them moonshine: they were not even a genuine reflection of virtue. He adopted them as expressions most likely to please Maggie's ear; just as, had she been of a more frivolous disposition, he would have used the language of flattery or passion. If there was any recognised calling in life in which he would have succeeded, it would have been that of the stage-lover; for whether the object of his adoration had been a "singing chambermaid" or a "serious widow," he would have played his part equally well. The wits of most sharp people run to making money, and there stagnate, as in a pond of yellow mud; but those of Richard ran to making love. They had also another channel—which the virtuous vaguely call "gambling transactions;" but in this he was not so successful, though equally diligent. This man, however, was not a mere selfish voluptuary. When passion was aroused he became reckless of all consequences, not only to others, but to himself. Disappointment did not sour him—for vinegar is not made in a moment—but rendered him at once both desperate and dangerous. To conclude this slight sketch of Mr Richard Milbank's character, we must add in fairness that, in addition to the great attraction of his looks, he was what is termed (by a not very discerning class of critics, however) exceedingly "good company," and was the idol of his particular public—which was to be found

for the most part within the walls of the *Sans Souci* club, at Hilton, and was confined even there to two apartments, the card-room and the billiard-room. It is thither that he is now walking, with a face more than ordinarily flushed, and a look of triumph in his large blue eyes which curiously contrasts with the frown above them.

"She is mine," mutters he to himself, "though not on my own terms. She will keep her promise now, no matter what happens. Though John may have robbed me of the money that should have been mine, he will miss the prize he has chiefly aimed at—and I shall win it—Well, what is it?" The last words are uttered aloud, in a rough, rude tone, and addressed to one who has stopped him in the street—a man of about his own age, tall and fair, and comely as himself, yet by no means like him in other respects. The unhealthy flush upon Richard's cheek is in this case merely a wholesome colour, slightly heightened, however, by the present *rencontre*; the flowing beard is absent, and the brown hair does not curl so crisply; it is long, and has the appearance of being thrown back, like the hair of angels carved in stone: the expression of the face, too, if not angelic, is patient, tender, and serious.

"I want to have a few words with you, Richard."

"If you want to have words with me, I will not balk you," answered the other scornfully. "But I shall not pick and choose for *mine*, I warn you."

"You shall not have the pretence of quarrel, brother, if I can help it. I wish to speak to you for your own good."

"That is so like Mr Morality!" returned Richard, with a sneering laugh. "You are always Harry the good boy, and I, Tommy the bad. 'For my own good,' forsooth! It was for my good, I suppose, that you gained my uncle's ear, and poisoned it against me, so that he has cut me off with a shilling! 'Being thus without the means of self-indulgence, my dear brother Richard,' you say to yourself, 'must needs become

temperate, and diligent, and sober, and will have cause to bless me for the *good* I have done him.'—Bah, you hypocrite!"

"You do me wrong, brother; but to that I am accustomed"——

"There he goes again!" interrupted Richard: "it is Tartuffe himself: 'Pray, spit upon me; I like to be spat upon!' Upon my soul, John, I have half a mind to gratify you!" And with an exclamation of disgust and loathing, he spat upon the ground.

"You will not allow me to talk with you and keep my self-respect, it seems," continued John Milbank, the colour in his cheek as deep by this time as that his brother wore; "I will therefore give my warning, and have done with it. You have coloured clothes, I see; let me advise you to put on black ones; and, at all events—unless you wish to learn better ways in the school of adversity in the manner you just spoke of—do not omit to attend the funeral to-morrow."

"What, in the Fiend's name, do you mean? Is it possible that you have the assurance to dictate to me as to what I think proper to wear, or to do! Why, one would think you had seen our uncle's will, and, as his heir, were already lord-ing it over your beggared brother!"

"I have not seen his will; but I know—no matter how—so much of its contents as to say that there is hope for you yet, if you will but pay a decent respect to his memory."

"What! he'll be there himself, will he, the unnatural old scoundrel, and execute a codicil! I defy him to do that, for, under the circumstances, he must needs set fire to the parchment. If he could have taken his money with him, as somebody says, it would all have *melted* by this time."

"Matthew Thurle is passed out of our judgment," returned John Milbank gravely, "and I will not hear him slandered. I have cleared my conscience, and given you your warning—

whether you take it or not lies with yourself, Richard." He was about to move away, when the other laid his hand upon his arm.

"One moment, John ; you have forgotten something."

"Have I so ? What is it ?"

"You have forgotten to finish off your little speech ; after the words 'Cleared my conscience, and given you warning,' you should have added : 'And now I wash my hands of you, Tommy !' The hypocrites never conclude anything, you know, without washing their hands !"

For an instant, when his brother had said, "You have forgotten something," John Milbank had been in hopes that he was touched by the effort which he had honestly made to avert his worldly ruin ; but one look at his mocking face had been sufficient to dissipate this hope, and he had turned upon his heel before the last insulting words had been fully spoken. Richard watched his retiring form with a grim smile.

"That is a man who, avoiding wines and dainty meats—which inflame the flesh—is said to live on porridge, and he might have saved his breath to cool it ! Yes, yes, my friend ; it is likely enough you should wish to be friends, knowing how you have robbed me. It would be a fine thing, indeed, if you could oust me from the old man's will and live like a lord at Rosebank, while I am a pauper, and yet keep yourself on good terms with your victim ! Better still, good Master John, if you could take wicked Tommy's sweetheart away from him and marry her yourself—also for his good, no doubt. If it had not been that I had got the whip-hand of him there, I should not have kept my temper so easily. What the deuce did the fellow mean with his 'There is hope for you yet ?' Does he call the chance of a five-pound note to buy a mourning-ring with 'hope ?' Confound him ! What does he mean by telling me to change these clothes, and be at the funeral to-morrow ? Why, he means to save his own credit,

no doubt. If I should not be there, it would be a protest against my uncle's injustice, and indirectly against himself, for having taken advantage of it. That is as clear as crystal. As it happens Brother John, I do mean to be at the funeral, though not because of anything that *you* have said. Ah, if you only knew whose pretty face and cherry lips have persuaded me, you would not perhaps have been so smooth-tongued! If I could only have got her to marry me to-day, and appear among them all to-morrow with Maggie tucked under my arm! *That* would be a triumph worth all Uncle Thurle's money, and would have snuffed out Mr John's exultation pretty completely. However, it's almost as good as that already. I'm in luck to-day, and shall go in for a 'plunge' on the strength of it." Then, sticking his hat rakishly on one side and whistling gaily, he pursued his way to the club.

CHAPTER IV.

THE "SANS SOUCI."

"THE Club" at Hilton, as it was designated by its frequenters—and rightly so, since there was no other similar establishment in the town—was a building so large and handsome that it might have dared comparison with many of its metropolitan brethren; but this scale of grandeur had necessitated that its members should be more numerous than select. While, therefore, it numbered amongst them the parliamentary representatives of the borough and many scions of the county families, and almost all the members male of the local aristocracy, it was forced to extend itself beyond these limits, and to admit individuals of inferior rank, and whose qualifications for club society were chiefly comprised in their ability to pay the entrance-money and subscriptions. It had been fondly hoped that the considerable expense of these would have deterred "the tag-rag and bob-tail"—as the large manufacturers in Hilton were given to designate their less wholesale brethren—from desiring to be admitted to the *Sans Souci*, whereas this was the very class that was found most ambitious of the honour, and who paid their money with the greatest cheerfulness. On the first starting of the club, a few of them had been admitted, as we have said, from necessity; but these, like "the small edge of the wedge," had made way for the entrance of their friends *en masse*; and when the more aristocratic members would have

closed the flood-gates, they had found the stream of democracy too strong for them ; they were out-voted in their own palace, and from thenceforth condemned to confine their exclusiveness to shrugs of the shoulders and liftings of the eyelids. Far be it from us to suggest that "lower dockyard people," to use Mr Jingle's definition of social inequality, are necessarily inferior in good behaviour to "upper dockyard people," retail folks to wholesale, or the "poor but honest" class of the community generally to "swells" of any description. But the interlopers at the *Sans Souci* were of a peculiar and objectionable kind. They were not the lesser order of manufacturers themselves, but their sons and nephews, who aspired to "sink the shop," and who endeavoured to show themselves the equals of their social superiors by out-bidding them in the extravagance of their club dinners, and the amount of their stakes at cards. Old Matthew Thurle, for instance, a much respected man in his way, but in a comparatively small way of business as an employer of labour, would never have dreamed of thrusting himself into the society of the magnates of Hilton ; whereas Richard Milbank, his nephew, having been left by his father with a few hundreds a year of his own, had joined the *Sans Souci* on the very first opportunity, and had spent and lost more money there than most of its frequenters. The club, in its outward aspect, was still as respectable as its founders could have desired : the dining-room, indeed, was occasionally occupied by parties of young men who loved champagne, not wisely, but too well, and whose loud laughter would cause some potent and reverend senior, taking his port in dignified solitude, to level at them his double eye-glasses in reprehension or contempt ; but the well-stocked library was as silent as the grave, and much less extensively tenanted ; the strangers'-room froze your blood with its cold seclusion ; and in the stately drawing-room, save for the falling leaf (of a newspaper), or the dropping of

a coal in the fire-place, there was an unbroken hush at all times. It was to these rooms that the original members of the *Sans Souci* for the most part confined themselves. They knew nothing, or affected to know nothing, of the "goings on" in the card-room and the billiard-room. In the former, afternoon play had been of late established, a thing which, common enough in London, is thought in itself to be an improper proceeding in the provinces, and the stakes were rumoured to be high—very much higher than the rules of the club countenanced, which, indeed, were set at defiance altogether. The committee had been appealed to, it was true, for the correction of this innovation ; but *quis custodiet*, etc., who shall commit a committee man ? The majority of the executive of the *Sans Souci*, as it was now constituted, were sinners in this respect themselves.

It is up to the card-room, three stories high, and placed thereby out of the supervision of venerable seniors, unless possessed of respiratory powers seldom allotted to their epoch of life, that Richard Milbank takes his way. It is an apartment that affects a dim and chastened gloom, that might seem adapted to quite another purpose. The blinds are drawn down over the windows, and the only light from within is that afforded by wax candles fastened into the card-tables, and surmounted by green shades, so as to shield the glare from the eyes of the players. Many of them are already assembled, for Richard, usually a most punctual attendant, has been delayed to-day by his visit to Maggie. A chorus of reproving voices greets his appearance.

"Dick Milbank late for school ; you shall have a bad mark !" cries one florid-faced old gentleman, the Falstaff of the card-room—Mr Roberts. He was once a banker in Hilton, but having had some disagreement with his firm, retired from it, and has had for years no other occupation than that in which he is now engaged.

"His bad mark is to come to-morrow.—Is not that so, Dick?" inquired another, looking up for a moment from his cards. This is Lawyer Gresham, whose presence in the *Sans Souci* is not owing to its new blood at all (upon which circumstance he secretly prides himself), but to the influence of a certain borough member, said to be much indebted for his seat for Hilton to this gentleman's electioneering skill. The clever tactics that had stood Mr Gresham in such good social stead during election time—his tact, his knowledge of mankind, his finesse—are fully as useful to him at the whist-table; and even though so successful at that game, he would yet be popular but for a certain malicious humour which he cannot control.

"Attend to your game, and don't remind a man of his misfortunes, Gresham," says the ex-banker rebukefully. "Besides, though the show of hands is certainly against our friend, he may come out at the head of the poll, after all.—May you not, Dick? You don't wear your uncle's colours, though, I see, eh?"

Everybody laughs at "Falstaff's" sally, which is directed against the new-comer's gay clothes.

"I shall put them on to-morrow at the hustings," answered Richard audaciously.

"Your brother is wearing them already," continued Mr Roberts; "he was looking so very sombre in the street to-day, that it struck me he would have no woeful looks left for to-morrow's ceremony, and I had a good mind to recommend him to black his face. However, I am sure I hope, as we all do, that he will not play Jacob to your Esau, and rob you of your birthright."

"Hear, hear!" answered more than one voice; for Richard, as we have already said, was really popular in his own circle, and besides, he had very bad luck at cards.

"Yes, indeed let us hope it will all come right," observed

Mr Gresham, "for we shall all be *sorry to lose you*, my good fellow."

This was a barbed shaft, for everybody knew that if Richard Milbank should be disinherited by his uncle he would have no more money to venture.

"Come and cut in here, and win Gresham's money; that's the only way to stop his mouth, Dick!" cried Mr Roberts good-humouredly; "we are playing 'pounds and fives.'"

Sovereign points and five pounds on the rubber are heavy stakes for any gentleman in a small way of business, and Richard generally confined himself to the points without the bet, which was euphoniously termed "flat pounds;" but, as we have seen, he considered himself in luck's way to-day, and had come to the club with the intention of having "a plunge"—a phrase which describes not only a cold bath, but also a determination to gamble. He therefore touched the whist-table with his hand, in token that he intended to cut in when the rubber should be concluded.

As he did so, "Dick, a word with you!" whispered a voice in his ear.

The whisperer was one of his most intimate associates—a young man of his own age, very dark and swarthy, and of herculean proportions, by name Dennis Blake. This man had led the same sort of life as Richard himself; had gone a little faster, perhaps, and sunk a little lower in the mud, but of that there were no outward traces in his case. He had a frame and constitution that, for the present, bade defiance to all inroads.

"Look here, Dick,—it's against the rules, you know," observed this gentleman, taking Milbank aside, "for you to cut in at that table."

"Rules! What rules?" inquired the other impatiently, as though rules were not very binding in his eyes, at all events,

but that any which might interfere with his own pleasures were, *ipso facto*, absurd and powerless.

"Well, it was settled by the committee last night, old fellow, that if a man had not paid his debts of the previous day, he was not to sit down to play. I don't refer to your debts to *me*, you know," added the speaker hastily, perceiving Richard's face to darken till it almost reached the complexion of his own: "of course, *I* know you're as straight as a die, but there are other creditors of yours here who might make themselves unpleasant. I thought I would put you on your guard."

Richard was well aware that this own peculiar friend of his, Dennis Blake—"Denny," as he sometimes called him, "for love and euphony"—was speaking two words for himself, and one for the "other creditors;" yet it would have hardly suited him to say so, since it must needs have provoked an open rupture. Moreover, he wanted to play, and his wish was ever a law to him.

"Oh, thanks," said he dryly; "but I think I'll risk it. Whatever happens, I shall settle with everybody to-morrow, you know, yourself included."

Richard Milbank did really intend to "settle with everybody," if he found himself mentioned to any considerable figure in his uncle's will; if not, he would also settle with them, in the sense of never entering the doors of the club again, or having a word to say to them. He had still a few hundreds left—for he was not so foolish as to denude himself of ready-money, if it could possibly be avoided—enough to keep himself for a week or two, and afterwards—when he should have persuaded Maggie to marry him, as he felt confident of doing—to defray the expenses of his honeymoon; and beyond that period it was not his nature to concern himself.

"Well, if you really are going to pay to-morrow, Dick,

honour bright," hesitated Blake; "only the notion *here* is" (and the speaker looked about him with a deprecating air) "that it is all up with your expectations. You can't wonder at fellows looking sharp after their money: it's every one for himself, you know, in this room."

"Is it?" replied Richard bitterly. "It seems to me, Blake, that some of you fellows are just a little greedy. You have had a good deal of my money among you."

"That may be: but if they have won of you, they have lost to others."

It was curious to remark how this gentleman would persist in putting "they" for "you:" the thing that he perhaps still called his conscience, dead to ordinary questions of right and wrong, had still some vitality in this particular matter, and taxed him with greed and harshness to his friend. It was still more curious to observe how quietly the other took his interference. Neither advice nor warning would Richard Milbank have submitted to for an instant from lips the most reverend and authoritative; and as for menace, he would have resented it with the most passionate audacity. He was savage with Blake, of course, and would have discharged his obligation to him by pushing him over an alpine precipice, had a safe opportunity offered, with a great deal of satisfaction; but the uppermost desire in his mind at present was to have his "plunge;" and the whim of the moment, as usual with him, was stronger than aught else. Without replying to his friend's last rejoinder, he moved towards the table, and as the rubber chanced to be just then brought to a conclusion, he cut in.

It is not necessary to follow his fortunes; suffice it to say that, like the majority of presentiments that occur to us (though we only remember those that are fulfilled), his notion that he was in luck that day was not realised with respect to the possession of good cards. He "put on" the money—as gam-

blers (most anomalously) do—with the intention of “pulling it off” again, but it was always pulled off by his adversaries. In the end, he lost all he had in his pocket and increased his already considerable debt to Dennis Blake by fifty pounds. This last, it was true, concerned him very little, since, if things went badly for him in the will, he never intended to pay him a shilling. But not daring to play on credit with any one else, he had encroached upon the sum he had designed for the expenses of his honeymoon, which would now have to be curtailed to three weeks at farthest. Even to reckless Richard, the future looked gloomy that evening, as he took his way to the Jew clothier’s to furnish himself with a suit of “inconsolables,” as the shopman termed it, against the all-important morrow.

CHAPTER V.

THE WILL.

ROSEBANK, the residence of the late Matthew Thurle, steel-plate manufacturer, was a picturesque cottage, situated so much at the extremity of the suburbs of Hilton as to be called, without flattery, a country-house. It had a large garden, full of the sweet-scented flowers from which the place derived its name; and the cultivation of them had been its owner's hobby. He had spent money on little else, for his tastes had been simple, as is usually the case with those who have made their own way in the world. Time was, and not so long ago, when Matthew Thurle had been in but a small way of business, and had had to borrow the money requisite for certain improvements in the machinery of his trade, which had subsequently yielded him a golden harvest; and the man who had lent it to him was Herbert Thorne. They had been friends from boyhood, and their pursuits in manhood had been similar, though not identical. They were equally diligent, equally sober, equally sagacious—but the wits of the one had taken a practical turn, and those of the other a theoretical. It was no wonder, therefore, that the former thrived in the world, and the latter found himself, at fifty years of age, a considerably less prosperous man than when he had started in life. Thurle had repaid his debt, with the legal interest, and would have repaid the obligation also, if Thorne had suggested to him any mode of doing so. With respect to this matter, mankind are divided into three

classes : the first, and most numerous, are neither ready nor willing to show their sense of past favours ; the second are willing, but not ready without pressure ; and the third—so small, as to be hardly called a class—are both ready and willing. Thurle belonged to the second class. He might, in his turn, have advanced money to his former creditor to procure certain patents ; one, especially, for the preparation of a peculiar ink which its inventor had entitled “terminable,” and that promised to repay him for years of thought and toil—but not having been applied to for the advance, he had shut his eyes to his friend’s obvious need of it, and turned the money over and over again in his own business. It was pleasant to him to see it grow and grow there ; and for the sake of that pleasure he denied himself almost every other, including that of benefiting his old school-fellow and companion. His household at Rosebank was decreased in inverse proportion to his means, until it consisted of but a single in-door servant, though no less than three gardeners were employed in the propagation of his roses. He entertained his friends so rarely and so sparsely, that they gradually dropped away from him, till he became that most pitiable of spectacles, an old man without a friend. He had two nephews, it was true, of whom the younger, John Milbank, was a man in some respects after his own heart—diligent, studious, averse to dissipation of all kinds, and who showed a remarkable aptitude for the business in which he had embarked his own darling gold ; yet, curiously enough, he could never, as he himself expressed it, “take to” John. His affection had centred upon Richard, the ne’er-do-well, the profligate, and it had clung to him despite many a rude shock.

There were reasons for this besides the liking for him, which needs no reason, and which weighs with most of us in such cases—though it was strange it should so weigh with *him*—more heavily than all the virtues in the opposite scale. In the first place, Richard was, or had been, made in a great

measure independent of him by his father's will; whereas John had little beyond his salary as his uncle's assistant: this possession of comparative wealth gave the former an importance in the gold-dazzled eyes of old Matthew; and he would gladly have enriched the nephew who did not (as he imagined) need his riches, although he had not deserved them, at the expense of his diligent brother, but that he felt that in Richard's hands the business which he had created and toiled for for so many years, and which he loved like a sentient creature, would without doubt go to ruin. In the second place, Richard had pleased the old man by his choice of a sweetheart in Maggie Thorne. He was not so blinded by mere money as not to recognise money's worth, and he saw in the clever, hard-working girl a valuable helpmate to any man, and to Richard the very guide and safeguard of which his frivolity and imprudence (for it was thus he mildly designated his favourite nephew's vices) made him stand so much in need. What weighed with him also, perhaps, no less was, that he looked upon the match as a discharge in full for the obligation which in time past he had incurred to Maggie's father, and which his conscience secretly reproached him for not having recognised more directly. It is only of late years that the charity bestowed after death—that of "benevolent founders," "munificent testators," and so forth—has been estimated at its due moral value (expressed arithmetically as nought divided by number one); and perhaps Matthew Thurle may be excused for imagining that he was doing a handsome thing in thus giving away what cost him nothing—namely, his consent to his nephew's union; but he was certainly blame-worthy in the selfish complacency with which he regarded the sacrifice of Maggie herself, who was at least as likely to suffer from Richard's proprietorship as the "business."

Thus matters had stood when Mr Thurle had been attacked by his last illness; but he had exhibited more severity towards his scapegrace nephew than he had really felt; and under the idea that his name would not appear in his uncle's will, Richard—as it was generally believed and whispered—had committed the outrage of which we have already spoken. At all events, some person had obtained by force the old man's signature to some document under the circumstances described, and it was certainly very suspicious that on his partial recovery Mr Thurle had instituted no steps for the apprehension of the offender. Under the influence of his immediate alarm, he had at first made known the matter; but he had since been very reluctant to speak of it; and the impression of those who knew him best was, that he had come to the conclusion that Richard Milbank—his favourite nephew, and indeed the only man for whom he had ever entertained what could be termed affection—and no other, had been the would-be robber. The circumstance that he had never sent for Richard since, even to bid him farewell, greatly corroborated the public opinion in this respect, and it was concluded by all, save Lawyer Linch and one other, that the elder nephew's name would not appear in the old man's will at all.

Curiosity as to this matter—though it would not thereby be satisfied—brought a good many persons to the funeral of Matthew Thurle; old acquaintances came, with whom, before the disease of getting and saving had settled upon him, he had been on familiar terms; and these the presence of some young fellows interested in Richard's fortunes, but by no means affected by the melancholy of the occasion, greatly scandalised. But after the ceremony was over, those who were privileged by invitation to repair to Rosebank and hear the last testament of the deceased were few indeed. They

comprised the family lawyer, Mr Linch—a lay preacher in the sect to which Mr Thurle had belonged, and who had opened his eyes very wide indeed at seeing Richard at the cemetery—Richard himself, pale and anxious, but with a devil-may-care air that strangely contrasted with his funereal garb ; John, a little more quiet and thoughtful than usual, perhaps, but without any demonstrations of woe—which in his case would certainly have been out of place enough ; he had done his uncle's bidding through life without pleasing him, and only now was about to enter into his reward ; Mrs Morden, the deaf housekeeper, who had come unasked up to the parlour—to “look after” her own interests, as Mr Linch afterwards jestingly remarked, since it was impossible she could hear what fortune might be in store for her ; Herbert Thorne, the steel-plate engraver ; and last, but by no means least in the eyes of three of the company, and the cynosure of all of them, his daughter. Why Maggie was there—for she had not been of the assemblage at the cemetery, which had been confined to males—was a question only herself could answer. She had announced her intention of being present, at breakfast that morning, to her father in her quiet, resolute way, and he had made no effort to oppose it. Whatever her motive, he thought it would be good for her to hear what the dead man had to say respecting Richard Milbank, for he expected some plain speaking ; and Maggie expected it, too, and went to comfort Richard. He thought she had never looked so beautiful as in her mourning clothes, and even whispered as much in her delicate ear. But she looked very grave, and turned her head away, as though the occasion was ill-chosen for such compliments. The scene, indeed, was serious and sombre enough, as the lawyer took his seat at the table, with the will in his hand ; while the rest, forming a half circle in front of him, sat all more or less expectant, awaiting its contents. The windows, which opened to the ground,

had been set wide, for the afternoon was sultry, and through them came the summer air, heavy and faint with rose odours, bringing with them to all present the memory of the dead man.

"He must have had something gentle and tender about him," reflected Maggie, "after all, to have been so fond of flowers : surely, he will not carry his severity to poor Richard beyond the tomb."

These hopeful thoughts were interrupted by Mr Lynch's short, dry cough, with which he always commenced what he called a "statement."

"This is the last will and testament of our late friend, Mr Matthew Thurle," said he, "executed in my presence, and duly witnessed, on the sixth of June last—only a few weeks before his decease."

Discarding its legal phraseology, and rejecting the moral and religious aphorisms with which it was curiously interspersed, so that it resembled less a will than a sermon, the document provided as follows :—

First, if "my nephew, Richard Milbank, shall, for any cause, save that of illness, absent himself from my funeral, or attend it without decent mourning apparel, he shall, *ipso facto*, be deprived of any benefits intended for him as hereafter written."

At this, Maggie cast a bright and rapid glance at her lover, as though she would have said : "See what would have happened, had I not persuaded you to behave with due respect !" But, to her surprise, he did not even look towards her : his gaze was fixed upon the floor with a frowning brow. He was, in fact, consumed with rage and chagrin : with rage, that his uncle should have laid this commandment on him—also because he had obeyed it, as might be imagined, out of fear ; and with chagrin, that he should seem to be indebted to John

for his escape from disinheritorance. It was true that he had been persuaded by Maggie, before his brother had spoken to him, to attend the funeral; but John could not have known that, and his intentions had therefore been generous and well-meant, and clearly laid him under a strong obligation.

"You will allow me to say, Mr Richard," said the lawyer, looking up at him from his papers, "as an old friend of your family, and one who has known you from a child, that I am glad to see you here; not only on your own account, but on that of your deceased uncle, to whom, if he knows what is happening here, I am sure your presence will give pleasure."

"My deceased uncle will be easily pleased, then," replied Richard coolly; "for, as it happens, I am here out of no respect for his memory whatever, but to please Miss Thorne yonder."

"Tut, tut, tut," said Mr Lynch; "this is very sad."

"Moreover," continued Richard, with an effort, "I am bound to say that my brother John gave me a hint that it would be better for my prospects that I should be here to-day; and though it did not affect my resolution, for the reason I have already given, and to which Miss Thorne will testify, I beg to acknowledge his"—he was about to say "generosity," but stopped himself, and substituted for it—"good intentions."

"This will, to my knowledge, has never been out of my hands," remarked Mr Lynch, turning sharply on John Milbank.

"My uncle informed me of its first provision," observed John quietly, "and in such a manner that I was led to the conclusion that he wished my brother to be informed of it."

"It was a very generous and brotherly act," exclaimed Mr. Linch, with unwonted enthusiasm.

"Had you not better proceed with the will," remarked Richard sullenly, "and preach your sermon afterwards to those who may remain to hear it?"

Mr. Linch bit his lip, and the colour came into his cheeks; the lay preacher was much given to hold discourses both in season and out of it, but the lawyer was well aware that he had exceeded his professional duties on the present occasion. Without rejoinder or further comment, therefore, he proceeded to read the provisions of the will.

The whole of the dead man's wealth, almost all of which was invested in the factory, was devised to his two nephews on the following conditions: they were to be partners in the business, which was not to be disposed of; and they were to live together at Rosebank, at least for the ensuing twelve months. The reasons for this curious proviso were also given. "By working side by side with John, and especially by living under the same roof with him, I look to see Richard become another man through his brother's example. I lay this injunction also upon my elder nephew—for my old friend Herbert Thorne's sake—that he does not marry Maggie Thorne for a twelvemonth from this date. In that time, having money at his disposal, and being his own master, it will be seen whether Richard is fit to be trusted with Maggie's fate. If he marries her earlier, he thereby forfeits all that I have above bequeathed to him, which thereupon will fall to his brother absolutely. And whosoever shall leave Rosebank during the above period, and live elsewhere, apart from his brother, shall similarly lose what I have left to him, which shall then revert to the other."

There were many such stringent regulations and enactments, but all aimed more or less to draw the brothers

together, with the express intention of benefiting the elder ; at the same time that the very precautions implied that he was a reprobate and a good-for-naught.

Of all the evil that lives after men, there is nothing so harmful as an unjust will—it parts those who are joined in bonds of friendship, and even of love itself ; it widens the fissure where they are already parted ; and it lays the foundations of jealousy and hate for generations to come. In the present case, two men who had not an idea in common, and whose natures were antagonistic in the extreme, were condemned by this dead man's ukase to dwell together for a year of their lives, and to share a common fortune for ever. It was felt by all who heard his mandates that Matthew Thurle had left mischief behind him ; and even the lawyer, looking from Richard's flushed and angry face to John's, so quiet and so pale, did not venture to address to either of the two co-heirs his customary phrase on such occasions : " I congratulate you."

The first person to speak was the deaf housekeeper.

" Has my master remembered his old servant, Mr Linch ?" inquired she, in a quavering voice. " I did not hear my name !"

The lawyer hesitated. It was a hard case, he knew, that this faithful creature, who had borne with old Thurle's temper for more than a quarter of a century, and had helped him in his darling scheme for saving money, to her own discomfort, had not been mentioned in his last testament.

" You are to have fifty pounds a year for life," said John Milbank, pitching his voice, as long habit had accustomed him to do, so as to reach the old woman's ear.

" God bless him !" she answered, with a sigh of relief, the picture of the parish workhouse probably becoming a dissolving view to her mental eyes. " I thought he would

not forget me ; and I hope he has not cut off Master Richard."

This was hard on John, though he was accustomed to find his brother preferred before him by the entire female sex—as an object of pity, it is true, but also of admiration ; but on this occasion at least he had his compensation. The company had now risen, and Maggie advanced towards him with outstretched hand and said : "I must thank you, John, upon my own account, for your generosity to Richard in urging him to be here to-day."

His face flushed to the temples, and his hand shook as he took hers ; but his voice was firm and quiet as usual as he replied : "I only did my duty, Maggie, in carrying out my uncle's wishes."

There was a certain primness, which his enemies called priggism, in all John said, even at his best.

Richard broke into a contemptuous laugh. "Well, I think we have had enough of duty and our uncle to-day," observed he scornfully.—"Mrs Morden, this old curmudgeon has not left you a single farthing," added he vehemently. "The annuity John spoke of will be paid you by him and me, so don't let us hear any more about your dear master !"

"Yes, yes ; God bless him !" answered the old lady, to whom only the last few words of Richard's speech were intelligible. "How he would have enjoyed the smell of them roses to-day. Wouldn't he ? But that's all over now."

Perhaps Richard would have made another attempt to undeceive her, had not Maggie interfered.

"If it pleases her to think her old master kinder than he was, why disturb her happy faith ?" said she.

"Yes, yes ; let her think what she likes," added John persuasively.

Richard shrugged his shoulders. "Since *you* wish it,

Maggie, let it be so," said he ; " but for my part," added he with significance, " I hate humbug and hypocrisy of all description."

There was an unpleasant pause, broken at last by a suggestion from the lawyer, that Mrs Morden should give up her keys to her young masters, that they might go over the house and explore their new possession. Whereupon, the little company, after a somewhat constrained farewell, took their departure, leaving the two young men alone at Rosebank.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CO-HEIRS.

"WELL," said Richard, when the housekeeper, not without tears in her old eyes, had produced the keys, and withdrawn to her own apartment, "you know the cottage well enough, I suppose; and as for me, though by no means so familiar with it, I have no curiosity about its contents, except in one respect—I should like to know what Uncle Matthew has left in his cellar."

"Just as you please," answered John quietly. "There is an inventory of everything except the wine."

"That is just like the old hunks: he took infinite pains about everything that a man of spirit despises; while all that makes life pleasant he deemed of no account."

John looked as if about to speak, but did not do so.

"What on earth are you at?" inquired the other impatiently.

"I am lighting a candle; the cellar is not lit from outside, you know."

"Bah! How those matches smell of brimstone! They remind me of where the old miser is gone himself! I should think he gave about a farthing a box for them. I'll just smoke a cigar, to make the room sweet. Just hand me that spill.—Thank you. Gad! if he saw me now, smoking in his best parlour, it would give him another turn of the screw."

With his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and smoking

his cigar, Richard followed his brother as he led the way with the candle.

"You had better be careful how you come down these steps," said John, when he had unlocked the cellar door, "for they are very steep."

"You are a fool to say so," laughed the other coarsely, "since nothing could turn out better for you than that I should pitch down here head-first, and break my neck! The place, as it is, looks uncommonly like a grave."

There were two cellars—one contained in the house itself, and the other built out underground; the walls of both were damp and mildewy, and on the bottles, particularly those in the outer compartment, the cobwebs were hanging in clusters. There was altogether an ample store of wine.

"Well, I call this a prize!" cried Richard, looking about him. "I will never again find fault with temperance and sobriety. The old fool must have become a teetotaler in his old age, surely.—I beg your pardon, though; I forgot that you had taken the pledge yourself. But you'll break it now; won't you? There's some '20 port here, if the seal tells true: I should think Father Matthew himself would absolve you for drinking *that*."

"My uncle drank very little of late years," remarked John coldly, without taking notice of the other's personal allusion; "and what he did drink was only the lighter sorts."

"The *cheaper* sorts, you mean, my good sir! Well, it was very wise of him, because they don't keep their body. At the same time, if he could have foreseen what was going to happen, he would probably have treated himself to something better. There's very little champagne, I see; we must look to that. But old Roberts will smack his lips over that port.—You know Roberts, of course, the banker that was."

"I know who he *is*," answered John quietly.

"Ah, but you shall know *him*—he's a man whose talk is

worth hearing. There's Gresham, too, as sharp as a needle. And if it comes to singing songs, I don't know a man in England that I would back against Dennis Blake. There are merry days, my good fellow, in store for you at Rosebank, I promise you, and many a jolly bout will we have in this old parlour."

They had left the cellar now, and were once more in the sitting-room; the weather had changed; the rain was falling heavily without, and all the sky was overcast and gloomy.

"You will ask whom you please to Rosebank, of course, Richard," observed his brother, "but I hope, while I am here, you will not invite Dennis Blake."

"Not ask Dennis! Why not? He is the very prince of good fellows, and my most particular friend."

"I am sorry to hear it. That is," added John, correcting himself, "since he is your friend, I will say nothing against him; but personally, he is very objectionable to me—I may even say offensive."

"That is because you don't understand him, my dear sir. You must know Denny intimately to appreciate him. The fact is, you have been consorting with little better than Quakers. I say nothing against them, because they are *your* friends. But now there is no more necessity for such asceticism; you have been wearing a hair shirt, but you may now indulge yourself with linen. You have not lost the *capacity* for enjoying yourself, I hope, through your long course of self-denial?"

"There has been no self-denial in my course of life, Richard," answered the other quietly. "I have lived, so far as my habits go, as pleased myself."

"And one other," returned Richard quickly. "Come, don't keep on at the old game, when there is no pool left to play for—when you have won the stakes. We are quite *alone*, you know, my good fellow, you and I."

Richard's air and tone were even more contemptuous than his words, yet a small red spot in the centre of his brother's cheeks was all the fire they kindled.

"I know we are alone, Richard," answered he, "and it is very wretched. Still, it is not my fault that it is so, but the misfortune of us both. Since it has pleased our uncle"—

Here Richard burst in with so vehement an execration that the other waited, as though it had been a clap of thunder, for it to pass away, ere he resumed :

"Since he has ordained that we should pass the next twelve months in each other's company, why not endeavour to make the best of it? Why make me feel, in your every word and look, that my society is abhorrent to you?"

"Because I can't help it," was the coarse response. "It is all very well for you, who are a saint, and can keep all your passions so dutifully under control that those who don't know you as I do suppose you have none."

Here the little red spot grew larger, and for a moment John Milbank looked towards his brother as Cain might have regarded Abel.

"You are very hard, Richard," said he; "you do not spare me."

"No, by Heaven! And I don't intend to do so. I mean to make this house unpleasant for you in every way; I tell you that. That is, if you refuse to listen to reason."

"To reason!" repeated John, in a tone the hopelessness of which made it unwittingly more contemptuous than any sneer.

"Oh yes, I can be reasonable enough when it suits me," continued Richard, "though it mayn't be your sort of reason. One may know on which side one's bread is buttered, quite as well as another, though one may not sacrifice every pleasure in life to the acquisition of a round of it. You have got your round, but I'll take precious good care you don't enjoy it.

You think it's a fine thing to be left share and share alike with me at Rosebank ; but I can tell you that I am going to be master here for all that. I'll have my friends here—Denny amongst them—every day in the week. We'll drink—Hollo ! what's that I read in your eye ? This prospect seems to give you pleasure ! 'Give this fellow rope enough,' you are saying to yourself, 'and he will hang himself.' You think old Herbert Thorne will object to such goings-on, and that before the year is out Maggie may cry off with me and on with somebody else. Ah, ha ! I have found you out, sly fox !”

“Richard,” cried John suddenly, “when you win at cards, is it not thought a cruel thing to taunt and crow over the loser ? You have at least the morality of the card-table, and to that I make an appeal. You are the winner, and I am the loser in—another matter. Is not that enough ? Can you not be silent over your victory ?”

“That depends, my fine fellow. The sight of you, I confess, has not a conciliatory effect upon me. We are like two dogs, you see, whom the keeper has coupled together : one, a staid, slow-going hound ; the other, a rover ; and the rover is the stronger one, and is likely to drag the other whether he will, or choke him. What we both want is to slip our collars ; and it lies with you to do it.”

“If you mean that it depends on me to alter my uncle's will, Richard, you are mistaken. You heard its terms yourself.”

“Its terms ! As if I—or you, for the matter of that—cared a farthing about its terms ! You will be talking to me next, like Lawyer Linch, about ‘the wishes of the testator.’ Is the habit of hypocrisy so easily lost, that it is necessary to be always keeping your hand in ?”

“I was merely referring to the facts of the case.”

“And so am I. The facts of the case are, that Uncle

Matthew wishes me to attend to the factory business ; and I don't mean to go near the place. He wishes me to imitate the example of your virtues, and to be edified by your conversation ; whereas I despise the one, and shall not listen to the other. You will do all the work, and like it. The companion that I shall choose for myself is not you, but Dennis Blake, or some such another—certainly not a serious teetotaler like yourself. This will happen, my good sir, whether you will assent to it or not ; but if you choose to be reasonable, things may be made very pleasant for both of us."

"I will make them as pleasant as I can, Richard."

"That is well said. Now you are beginning to talk sense. What we are both endeavouring after is a divorce, you see, without the 'Queen's proctor intervening.' There must be no collusion that anybody can lay hold of ; and at the same time we must get free. You shall have the business to yourself—without my even so much as looking into an account—and I will take, not half, but so much of the profits as you consider fair, since I shall be only a sleeping-partner."

"You shall have half, Richard."

"Well, to be sure, I want money more than you do ; and it ought to be considered that my uncle would have made me his heir, but for my own doings. Then one or other of us must leave Rosebank."

"I would wish that as much as you, Richard ; but it is impossible. If I left you here, I should be forfeiting every shilling of my uncle's bequest."

"Then, I'll go. The money will then, it is true, revert to you by law ; but you are a man of honour, and I'll trust you. Give me your word that it shall make no difference"—

"I would not trust myself to do such a thing, Richard," interrupted the other hastily. "I thank you for your confidence, but the temptation might be too powerful for me. I would not risk it."

"Then give me your bond. I'll find a better lawyer than Lynch, who will make me safe enough. Just imagine what a twelvemonth lies before us, and how we shall detest one another before it's over!"

"That is true," murmured the other with a shudder.

"Just so. Then why should you hesitate? We shall both be free, and each pursue that road in life which happens to be most attractive to us. You will extend the business—I will never ask for a farthing more than half the present profits of it—and become a merchant-prince in time, no doubt. You will have your little tea-fights and prayer-meetings here at Rosebank, and enjoy them, I hope, to your heart's content."

"And you?"

"Oh, I shall also become thoroughly domesticated, though not, perhaps, quite so much in the tame-cat line. I shall marry Maggie—privately, of course—at once, and live happily ever afterwards. After years of separation, you may feel a tenderness for your only brother; and when you die, may bequeath ten thousand pounds apiece to each of your nephews and nieces. Who knows? Come; is it a bargain?"

"No, Richard," answered the other positively; "it is impossible."

"Yet you thought it not impossible a minute ago; I'll swear to it! Shall I tell you what caused you to alter your opinion? Your objection is only to the last part of the arrangement—that I should marry at once. It is extraordinary, considering your secretive habits, that you have no command over your countenance. I can read you like a book—of course, full of moralities. Don't be a fool, John! If you think that Maggie will not wait a year for me, you are vastly mistaken. It was only yesterday that she undertook to marry me out of hand, and go to America, in case things had turned out worse to-day for me than they have. As it is,

they will have turned out bad for *you*, if you are obstinate. I ask you once more—are we to wear this galling chain or not ? ”

“ And I tell you once more, I have no power to break it, Richard ! ”

“ That is to say, you have no wish. Very good ! The matter henceforth is dropped ; and whatever happens, you have only yourself to blame for it.—And now, may I ask you, my good sir, in the character of partner, how am I to get some ready money, of which I stand much in need ? I suppose my cheques upon the firm will be honoured ? ”

“ In time, and within the limits specified by Uncle Matthew’s will, no doubt they will ; but, as Mr Linch will tell you ”——

“ Bother Mr Linch ! I can’t wait while the accounts are being looked into, if you mean that. My uncle left some money in the bank, did he not ? ”

“ Yes ; eight hundred pounds was the exact sum, as you perhaps remember.”

Richard’s handsome face grew very dark, for he could not affect to misunderstand his brother’s allusion. To know that one is guilty of a baseness is very bitter ; to know that another knows it, is still worse ; but the dregs of the gall are in the draught when that other reveals to you his knowledge. Richard hated John more than he had ever done, for those four words, “ As you perhaps remember.” Not a syllable, however, did he utter in rejoinder.

“ I want four hundred pounds,” was all he said. “ Can I have it at once ? ”

“ Not out of our uncle’s bequest, as I should suppose, at present. But I have about as much as that of my own, and I will advance it you.”

“ Very good. I will give you my I O U.” And he sat down and wrote it accordingly, in return for his brother’s cheque. Then crumpling the latter into his pocket, he lit a

second cigar, and strode out of the house and into the pouring rain without a word.

His scheme had been to so foreshadow their mutual relations as to disgust his brother, and compel him to enter into some arrangement to evade the conditions of their uncle's will ; but having failed, he bitterly resolved that the picture he had drawn of John's discomfort should be borne out to the uttermost by the reality.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WET BLANKET.

It is often objected to the good characters in works of fiction, that they are not made sufficiently "interesting," and that the cause of morality thereby suffers ; and yet, after all, the novelist is in this particular only drawing from life itself. It was a complaint made by a great religious leader, in connection with the question of psalm-singing, that "the de'il had all the best tunes ;" and, in spite of some isolated efforts to prevent him, the devil still possesses them. The graces of good manners, of wit, and above all, of "naturalness," are almost always conspicuous by their absence in those who call themselves religious persons. Their "cheerfulness"—though we all agree it is highly commendable—is not attractive, since it often partakes of that character which is termed by the frivolous "deadly lively." It is not so easy to be all things to all men as an apostle might wish, and the attempt of the virtuous to win over the wicked by geniality is almost always a failure. Like the well-meant efforts of men of science to gild the pill of instruction, they fail even in the gilding. The orrery by which we are to be attracted towards the heavenly bodies is itself a melancholy object, and only amusing from the fact that it aspires to be so. So much is this the case, that a clergyman who happens to have a natural turn for humour is generally looked on with some suspicion by his

own cloth, and it is whispered : " It is a pity he took orders." And what is true in this respect of persons of earnest religious feeling, is still more so in the case of those of a rigid morality. They are not only unattractive to their fellow-creatures, but often even intolerable ; which does not so much arise from their being virtuous while the rest of the world like cakes and ale, as from their want of sympathy, their reserve, and from those characteristics the possessor of which is apt to be described in brief as " a wet blanket."

" The Wet Blanket " was the name by which John Milbank was known in social circles at Hilton, as though he had been an Indian chief. He was undeniably handsome, and personal beauty is itself a powerful social auxiliary even in a man ; " a good looking fellow " has, in spite of Wilkes's saying, more than a quarter of an hour's start of an ugly one, even with those of his own sex. But this advantage was thrown away in John's case by the absence of the desire to please. In women, indeed, he excited a temporary interest ; but when they found he was marble it soon died away, or crystallised into the sort of admiration with which one regards a statue. It could not be said of him that " he taught in a Sunday school, and had not a vice," because he did not teach in a Sunday school. The religious sect to which, in common with his late uncle, he belonged was proud of him, by reason of his growing importance, rather than from any gracious sign of piety in the young man : he would one day become a powerful member of their church, since diligence, sobriety, and intelligence unfailingly lead to power ; but they did not expect from him an enthusiastic support. He attended their prayer-meetings pretty regularly, but by no means so often as he might have done ; and now and then he had a tendency to " withstand the word"—that is, as Mr Lynch preached it. In morals, too, he was not so much austere, which would have been creditable,

as apparently unmoved by temptation—a circumstance which, by the fair sex, was naturally felt to be insulting. Even in the most respectable circles, it may be remarked that a man who “doesn’t care for ladies’ society,” or is not “impressionable,” is held in more disfavour than a rake. John Milbank was not a saint, in short, but quite as unpopular as though he had been one. On the other hand, he had some fine qualities of a positive and active sort. He was as just as Aristides, and yet generous to a fault. For all his “getting,” he never refused to give. His hand, as more and more was poured into it, remained open as ever, not only to the necessities of the poor, but even to more doubtful claimants. He had more than once assisted his brother with money to defray his extravagances; toiled and tasked himself for months to procure funds for him, that had been wasted in a day. This, indeed, had not happened very lately, for the breach had been so wide between them, that Richard had not had the front of brass to apply to him for assistance; but, as we have seen, John had made a generous effort to secure to his brother the half of that wealth which would else, as he had good reason to suppose, have accrued to himself alone; nor could anything have proved more incontestably the confidence which his uncle had reposed in his generosity of disposition, than the hint which he had given him of the contents of his testament. Even now, notwithstanding the ungraciousness with which his kindly warning had been received, he did not regret it, nor would he have done so, even if, through it alone, his brother had saved his inheritance. His sense of duty overbore all other considerations; and only less strong than that was his sense of the obligations of kinship. He could not love his brother; the text that assumes the knowledge of that relative as a reason for loving him had no application in the case; for it was his very acquaintance with Richard’s character that

prevented him from entertaining affection for him ; but he thought himself bound to defend and advance his interests for all that, even to his own hurt—save in one particular. He could not, and he would not, assist him to marry Maggie Thorne.

If you had opened John Milbank's heart, you would have found her name engraved on that true metal, more deeply than her father had ever cut into steel. No one had read it there, as he had flattered himself, until an hour ago, when Richard had taunted him with that fatal secret. He had never told his love, nor thought of telling it ; it would have been of no use to do so, it was true, since Richard, his superior in every way in the eyes of womankind, had declared his intentions of winning Maggie ; but still it was for Richard's sake that he had never so much as sighed for her ; had buried her, as it were, in his heart, and sorrowed for her loss, as though—almost—she had been really dead to him. It was that "almost" which had of late become the fiery trial of John Milbank's life. There had been a temptation to him far beyond that of wealth—to keep the knowledge of his uncle's will from Richard, so that his marriage with Maggie should have been rendered impossible, through lack of means. He had put that from him, like a man—for few women in such a case would have exercised a similar self-denial—and had been in some degree rewarded for it. The marriage which poverty might, after all, have hastened in one so reckless as his brother, had been at least postponed. It afforded John no actual hope, indeed, but it was a reprieve from what would have been despair. On the other hand, Richard had discovered that he was his rival, and thereby possessed himself of a weapon against which he had no defence, and the wounds of which were terrible ; and he had already shown that he would not spare to use it.

Gloomy as was the prospect of the next twelve months for

John, it was not that which now weighed upon his mind, as he sat alone at quiet Rosebank—soon to be the scene of unwelcome revelry and riot. Discomfort and insolence he would have to bear, no doubt ; but it was not of himself that he was thinking, nor of the ordeal through which he was about to pass. He looked beyond that time, and shuddered at the fate that was awaiting Maggie. The heartless selfishness and brutal vice of Richard Milbank were revealed to him as they had never been before, and it was Maggie who would be their helpless victim. He did not believe that any conduct of this man, in the meantime, however gross, would alienate her affections from him, though he could not refrain from speculating upon the possibility of such an occurrence. Richard had bewitched her from the first, and had retained her love without an effort on his part ; nay, notwithstanding that he had been remiss in his attentions to her, and notoriously given up to vice and folly. He had been faithless to her, too, John knew, though Maggie probably did not ; and that reflection was accompanied by another. Should he let her know it ? It would be a base thing to do, in one sense ; but if nothing short of having her eyes opened to the depravity of this man could save her from life-long wretchedness, would it not be justifiable ? Perhaps. Yet if *he*, John, were to be the cause of her enlightenment, would it be to save her from Richard, or to recommend to her himself ? A question not to be satisfactorily answered ; and, moreover, he could never recommend himself to her that way. No ; nor, as it seemed, in any way. Maggie had never liked him—had never spoken a really pleasant word to him until that afternoon, and then it had only been to thank him for his generosity to Richard. It had been delicious to him to see her smile, to hear her gracious words, to take her little hand, and feel it press his own ; but it had also been wormwood ; for did not her very gratitude

imply that she and Richard were already one, or as good as one! No; if Richard were dead, he should be no nearer to possessing her, since she had evidently an antipathy to him. (He was wrong here: Maggie had no antipathy to him, though little sympathy with his character—which she nevertheless secretly respected and admired; but she resented his virtues, the possession of which seemed a reproach to his brother, and especially the praise of them by others.) How cruel and unjust it seemed! All his heart was hers; all his thoughts were for her. To work for her would have been the greatest bliss his imagination could conceive. Yet all this devotion weighed as nothing against a few passionate glances from Richard's eyes, a few careless vows from Richard's lips!

What was it that his brother possessed, and he did not, which, notwithstanding the former's follies, made him everywhere the favourite with all women, and with nine-tenths of their male acquaintance, including even so business-loving and sedate a personage as had been their Uncle Matthew? Poor John even went the length of looking at himself in the little pier-glass, as though some explanation of the phenomenon might be discovered *there*. And, indeed, in the rueful countenance which now confronted him—so seldom regarded by himself that it was quite a novel study—he did seem to recognise some of his social defects. It was not, he owned, as a young man's face should be; there were lines about it that looked like the autograph of Time himself; the forehead was not smooth; and the muscles about the mouth were hard and set, not mobile, as in those who are given to smile. "She thinks me a dull dog, no doubt," sighed he; "well, at least she shall have no cause to call me a surly one."

Did all his bitterness, and murmuring against the hardness of his fate result, then, but in resignation? Did he intend to submit patiently to all indignities that might be put upon

him, well content if he should secure an acknowledgment of his forbearance from Maggie's lips? Or did he entertain a hope that before the year was out something might happen yet to reward him for years of silent but supreme devotion; that her love for Richard might wane through his own reckless ill-doing; and that her pity for himself might grow to love, or at least to the toleration which he was willing to accept in its stead? It is a question that at present cannot be answered, since, if he had that day been asked it, John Milbank could not have answered it himself.

CHAPTER VIII.

FORGIVEN.

THOUGH not usually what is called "a man of his word," Richard Milbank kept it as respected his proceedings at Rosebank to the letter. He assembled there the jovial spirits of whom he had spoken to John so eulogistically, and showed him "life," in what he well knew would prove to be a very unattractive form. Hitherto, the two brothers had lived almost wholly apart—the elder occupying "apartments" in the more fashionable part of the town; and John, in lodgings near the factory. They had had few acquaintances in common, and those who were now Richard's most frequent guests at the cottage were not among them. John had indeed met Dennis Blake, just after it had become pretty well known that his brother was paying court to Maggie; and something that "Denny" had said to him regarding that young woman—by no means intended to be disagreeable, but spoken out of the fulness of the young-gentleman's—well—animal spirits, had offended him mortally. He had received the remark with nothing beyond a cold disapproval, that had caused Mr Blake to say of him that "it was easy to see he was not of the right sort;" but, as a matter of fact, he had been within an inch or so of taking his brother's ally by his bull neck and shaking the life out of him. It was very unreasonable in him to be even annoyed—as those friends to whom Mr Blake confided the matter (which he did as a

good joke) were all agreed—since, after all, Maggie Thorne was not his sister-in-law yet, and surely one may talk of any young woman to one's fellow-man—she not being related to him by either blood or marriage—with vivacity and freedom. "Indeed, for all I care," said Denny, in his simplicity and candour, "he may tell Dick himself."

But Dick had never known, and never did know, why, of all his dissolute companions, Dennis Blake was especially obnoxious to his brother; he only knew that he *was* so, and asked him all the more frequently to Rosebank on that account. They were great friends again, those two, now that the card debt between them was settled; and the little parlour at the cottage had become the scene of even more considerable "operations" than those which had been carried on at the *Sans Souci*. Often and often when John came back to what was now his home he found a quiet little company sitting up to their knees in cards—for those against whom luck was running insisted upon new packs, not the less, perhaps, since they were supplied to them for nothing—and with the table covered with gold and notes, as though it had been that of a money-changer. If it was a spectacle, as Mrs Morden said it was, to "make the old master turn in his grave," he must have made a good many such revolutions.

John himself was not, as may be imagined, received by these gentry with enthusiasm; indeed, they were much too occupied with their gains and losses to pay great attention to his arrival; but, either to show that he had a right to be there, or in order to obey the letter of his uncle's will (since to comply with its spirit was out of the question), he seldom let a day pass without giving his brother the opportunity of speech with him. At first he had even dined in his company, accommodating his own early hours to suit Richard's more fashionable habits; but as there were always guests at table whose presence was more or less unwelcome to him, and some

of whom did not hesitate to show that they reciprocated this want of sympathy, he had discontinued the custom. He would come home late—or what was late for him—and, after looking in upon the card-party for a few minutes, would retire to his chamber—not always, however, to rest; for though the company were sedate and serious enough before supper, they were wont after that meal to grow so uproarious that the deaf old housekeeper would awake from slumber with the utterly false impression that she was in Little Bethel Chapel, and that Mr Linch had just given out the hymn. It was complained by some members of the *Sans Souci* that there was now quite a difficulty in getting up a rubber there, since all the choicer spirits—which meant those most devoted to high play—were drawn away from it by the superior attractions of Rosebank. Nor, it was whispered, was it only whist that was played there, but unhallowed games—such as loo, and even brag. “And mark my words,” said Colonel Hardhead—who had made a sort of professional income out of the more scientific amusement of about three hundred pounds for the last twenty years—“there will be a row at that man Milbank’s. No young fellow can hurt himself, to speak of, at short whist,” this military moralist went on to say; “but when it comes to gambling games, there is no telling what he mayn’t lose.” Nor was gambling, unhappily, the only vice that was now practised in what Miss Linch, the lawyer’s sister—an ancient, but still very marriageable maiden, who had paid delicate attentions, indeed so delicate that he had never so much as observed them, to Mr Matthew Thurle for the last quarter of a century—had been wont poetically to term “The Rose Bower.” The ’20 port, the long untouched bin of brown sherry, were, to use their new proprietor’s own phrase, “punished very severely;” and people who inflict that sort of chastisement—like a loving father who corrects his child—often suffer for it in their own

persons. Drink had always been one of Richard's weaknesses, and, now that he could indulge it without stint, it was gaining the mastery over him with rapid strides. He drank when he was winning, for very joy; he drank when he was losing, to keep up his spirits; and when he was neither winning nor losing, which was about half his time, he drank because he felt the need of a stimulant. The only approach to regularity and system which his character exhibited, was in keeping his "cellar book" in a most methodical manner, and entering in it every bottle that was withdrawn from that fast-failing treasure-cave. In the middle of a debauch, he would leave his companions, and, with some social platitude about "every man being his own butler," would stagger down to the bins, bring up more wine himself, and set it down in his book "before he forgot it."

"You keep that book, I suppose, by 'double entry,' Dick," said Mr Roberts, on an occasion when this young Apollo was looking more than usually like Silenus.

Nor was it only in the presence of his boon companions that Richard thus disgraced himself. As time went on—the time in which he called himself "his own master," but which was making him more and more a slave—indulgence in this respect had grown so much a habit with him, that he could not shake it off even when he would have done so. And on one occasion, when, for once, a joint invitation from the two brothers had brought Mr Linch and his sister, with Mr Thorne and Maggie, to dine at Rosebank, Richard's behaviour at his own table was what even simple Miss Linch could not forbear to hint at to Maggie in the drawing-room as "very peculiar." What Maggie thought of it was not stated; but what the gentlemen guests thought of it may be gathered from the fact that they had taken both the ladies home, without giving them the opportunity of making a cup of tea—which might have done him good—for the master of the house. The person who

suffered most upon that painful occasion was John Milbank, because he most clearly understood what Maggie was suffering, and was absolutely unable, from the nature of the case, to conceal that he did so. If he had had time to consider the affair, perhaps he might have found cause for selfish congratulation ; but in the meantime he was too much pained to enter into such reflections, and besides, was fully occupied by his attempts to smooth matters.

When Herbert Thorne and his daughter got home that night, the former made one more effort—the first since Richard had come into his property, nine months ago—to remonstrate with Maggie upon her engagement.

"You see, what I told you would happen has come to pass, Maggie," observed he bluntly: "Richard Milbank has become a sot."

"Father, this is your house," answered the girl, at the same time rising from her chair, "and you have, of course, the right to say in it what you please ; but I will not stay here if you speak such words of Richard !"

She spoke in desperate earnest, and even moved towards the shawl and bonnet which she had just laid aside upon the table. It was evidently no use to *drive* her from the path that she had chosen. That would only hurry her over the precipice round which she ran.

"I do not wish to use hard words, Maggie, and certainly not words to pain you ; but what is to be thought of Richard Milbank's behaviour to you, to me, to all of us, at his own table to-day ? Is it possible that you could not see he was intoxicated ?"

"I did see that !" She had seen it long before the old man had done so ; the sense of it had reached her heart, and chilled it, alas ! without numbing it to pain, before the suspicion of it had dawned in her father's brain. "It was shocking and most sad ; but then he knows that you look

unfavourably upon him, and that Mr Lynch is not his friend ; and that puts him ill at ease. I think he took the wine in order to give him vivacity. I don't defend him, but I think there was some excuse. I am sure his brother thought that, by the way he took it."

"John is his good angel, of course, if only Richard would let him be so ; but he will not. His example and advice are utterly thrown away upon him. He strove to enrich him at his own expense, and the return which he has got for it is, that this fellow has already half ruined him."

"Half ruined John ? How can that be ?"

"First, by borrowing money of him, which he has not repaid, and never can repay ; then, by drawing out every shilling he can lay his hands upon from the business, so that it is almost crippled. Of course, you did not know this ; nor should I have done so, if I had waited for John to tell me. He is one of those who never complain. But it is none the less true, for all that. I doubt, Maggie, whether Richard Milbank is any the better off at this moment, if everything was to be made square, than before his uncle's death."

"He is no worse off, at all events, father, than when I promised to marry him," was the quiet reply.

"Worse off ! As to money, perhaps not. But is he no worse ? Maggie, darling, look into your heart, and tell me truthfully, have you any genuine confidence in this man ? Do you think that, though the patience and long-suffering of his brother have been utterly thrown away upon him, you may yet win him from ruin, as his wife ? Is there any reasonable expectation of it ? Nay, is there even hope ?"

Maggie answered not a word, nor even looked up at her father, but sat with her fingers plucking at a little bouquet of roses, which Richard had gathered her from the garden before they had sat down to table.

"You know, my girl, that I am but speaking the bare

truth when I say that the gulf of ruin gapes for you, and that the branch by which you trust to save yourself from it, though green and pleasant to the eye, is rotten and worthless. Are you bewitched by this handsome scoundrel? Has he fascinated you, as the snake fascinates the poor innocent bird, merely with his bright eyes? If you were not my daughter, I should say that the father of such a girl must needs be ashamed of her."

Into her pale cheeks there stole a scarlet flush, as though one of the rose petals she was stripping from their stem and strewing on the ground had settled there; but her voice was very quiet as she replied: "Speak of *me* as you please, father, and whatever you speak of me, I will not even say that I have not deserved it. Perhaps I *am* bewitched. I have nothing to answer in Richard's defence, nor in my own, except three words: I love him!"

"You are easily satisfied, Maggie. If your mother had given the same reason for choosing me for a husband, she would at least have added: 'And *he* loves *me*.'"

"Richard *does* love me, father!" answered Maggie vehemently. "If you were to paint him ever so darkly, and then convince me that the portrait was a correct one, I should still be sure of *that*."

"Then love is not what love was in my time, lass!" sighed the old man, with the air of one who is weary of contention. "Why, the man never comes to see you; or, at least, I could count on my fingers the times that he has been here since his uncle left him his co-heir. He must be sure of you indeed, Maggie, since he takes such little pains to keep what he has so lightly won."

Nothing more that night was spoken between the father and daughter upon the matter; for, indeed, each had said all they had to say; but, as sometimes happens in arguments, the arrow that had been shot with the least care had gone

nighest home. The Parthian shaft which the engraver had let fly at a venture when all seemed over, and he was indeed in full retreat, had almost turned the fortune of the battle. Maggie could have resisted anything in the way of depreciation of her lover, simply by entrenching herself behind the rampart of unbelief; but the suggestion that Richard was neglecting her was insupportable, since she had her own suspicions that it was true.

The very next morning, however, as it happened, Richard made his appearance at the engraver's house, not to excuse his conduct of the previous evening, nor even to extenuate it, he said, but to throw himself—as he confessed he had often done before—on his darling's mercy; a course of conduct which not only reinstated him in her good graces, but probably placed him higher therein than he would have been had he never fallen. He spent the whole morning in her company—not without stealing a furtive look or two at his watch, however—and seemed to take a greater interest in her occupations and pursuits than he had ever done before. As to the state of his affairs, concerning which she put some straightforward questions—without, however, any tincture of reproach—he told her very frankly that they were far from flourishing, and that when the year was out he might again propose to her to share his fortunes across the Atlantic.

"You once spoke to me of 'a fresh start,' Maggie, in a new country," said he, with a penitent sigh, "and I have often wished that fortune—though it seemed to be a good fortune—had not interfered to prevent my trying it. I doubt we shall have to try it, after all."

"So much the better, darling," answered she resolutely. "Removed from these terrible temptations, which in your wiser moments you regret so much, you will then be a happier man. You smile, Richard, but it is not with your old smile! Oh surely, surely, you will not regret them!"

"I was not thinking of them at all, Maggie," whispered the young man; "I was only regretting the time lost which we might have spent together, since I might have called you mine six months ago."

Richard Milbank may have been dull at figures; but for skill in getting his somewhat cooked accounts passed by an auditress in the High Court of Love he had few superiors.

CHAPTER IX.

THE THREE MONTHS' BILL.

LATE one afternoon, when John Milbank was closing his desk at the office, the day's work being done, word was brought that a stranger wished to see him. "Show him up," said John mechanically. He was not so eager to do business as he had been ; first, because his mind was engrossed with another matter (in two months, or less, Maggie would be lost to him for ever ; for it was not likely that Richard would delay his marriage one day beyond the limit imposed by his uncle's will) ; secondly, because while his brother remained his partner, a continuous drain upon the resources of the firm, it was hopeless to push its interests.

There entered to him a man with a grey head and beard, but thickly built, and with no trace of age in his gait or bearing. His dark and piercing eyes had a furtive look, and in a tone which was not altogether unfamiliar to John, he asked to have a few words with him in private.

John was not suspicious, and fear was unknown to him ; still, it was a comfort to reflect that a large sum of money which had been in the office strong-box that morning was now lying safe at the banker's. It was not business gains—far from it : he had just disposed of the proceeds of a certain property at a dead loss, and which his brother's expenditure had compelled him to realise.

"We are quite private here, sir, and you need not fear interruption," was his quiet reply.

"I am not a man of business," observed the stranger, "and therefore you must forgive me if I am out of order in what I am about to ask you. It may be an impertinence, in which case the personal interest I have in the question must plead my excuse."

Where was it that John had heard this specious yet unconvincing tongue before? a tongue that seemed to require schooling to be decent, and to have had infinite pains taken with it, in the way of butter, to smooth off its rough edge.

"I am not easily offended, sir," said John, eyeing his visitor very narrowly, "where, at least, no offence is meant."

"Then may I ask you, whether you have a certain bill out—a bill for a thousand pounds at three months' date from yesterday?"

John was like a rock as to his limbs, but he felt his heart fail within him. He knew of no such bill, but it was possible that his reckless brother might have drawn it on the house without his knowledge. If it was so, and he should honour it, the sacrifice he had just made for the sake of ready-money, for the carrying on of his trade, would go for nothing. If he did not honour it, disgrace would befall Richard, and alas, on her who would then be one with him, before their honeymoon was over. Their honeymoon! Why had he not consented to Richard's proposal at first, and let them marry? The agony that he now endured would have then been over long ago, the wound in his heart might have even cicatrised, and he would have been spared these many months of meagre hope, that were now flickering out to leave him in black despair. Moreover, he would have escaped the material losses which Richard's conduct (and his own thankless leniency) had brought upon him, and which, if the man spoke truth, were now about to culminate in what was almost ruin.

"A bill at three months for a thousand pounds," said John quietly. "We may have such a bill out; but I should not gratify the curiosity of a stranger"—

"*May* have? Why, the bill is accepted by yourself!" broke in the other coarsely.

"I know him now," whispered John to himself. "There is some devil's work afoot, then." Though the sweat was on his brow his face was calm; his heart, though sick and weary, was resolute: whoever's foot should be placed upon his neck, he swore it should not be this man's foot.

"Let me look at the bill," said he quietly.

"Look at it, sir? What for? You have not so many thousand-pound bills out, I conclude, as not to be able to say "Yes" or "No" to my first question! Look at it? Well, so you shall; but not too close! I am not going to risk your snatching it out of my hand and throwing it into the fire!"

In his utter contempt and loathing of this man, John Milbank smiled. "What dull villains must such wretches be, to suppose honest men are like themselves," thought he.

"Why, you don't mean to say it's all right?" cried his visitor, encouraged by John's quiet, which contrasted strangely with his own vehemence and indignation. "When a man has given money down for a thing like this"—

"Did you give money down, sir?"

"Well, yes, I did; some money. There was value received, if you mean that. And if he'd tricked me—if this, I say, was waste-paper, well, I'd hang him! By Heaven, I would!"

"Whom would you hang?"

"Never mind who; the dog who gave it me. His name is not here; this is your name. You know your handwriting, I suppose." He held a slip of paper out at arm's-length, which John regarded attentively. "*John Milbank*: that is

plain enough, sir," he continued. "Is that worth a thousand pounds or not?"

"It is certainly not worth a thousand pounds."

"Then your brother shall lodge in jail to-night, as sure as his name is Richard."

"Or as yours is Dennis Blake."

"Well, what if it is? I came here thus disguised not for my own sake."

"Of course not: it was for the sake of the money. If you found the bill all right, you would have gone away without your dear friend knowing that you had entertained the least suspicion of him. As it happens, you have made a slight mistake. The handwriting is my own."

"Then how can the bill be valueless? You don't mean to tell me that you are stumped out—bankrupt? The unprincipled villain! And he has got two hundred pounds of mine, unless he has lost it this afternoon. He shall disgorge it, or"——

"One moment, Mr Blake," for the visitor had snatched up his hat, and was already at the door. "Business is not conducted quite so quickly as a game at short-whist. You jumped too much at conclusions. I never said the bill was worth nothing; I only said it was not worth a thousand pounds. You will discover that yourself when you try to discount it. The bank is shut for to-day; but I will give you a cheque for the same money as it would fetch, if you want to get rid of the bill."

"I very much want to get rid of it," answered Blake frankly. "I am all for ready-money transactions. It was only because your brother was my friend, you see"——

"I quite see, Mr Blake," interrupted John frigidly. "You would make, I am sure, any sacrifice to friendship."

"Well, I would go as far as most, that I will say. But when your brother said: 'Now, that bill must not be pre-

sented till it comes due,' and I knew that in a month or two he might be across seas with his young woman, that, of course, rather aroused my suspicions. But since you have chosen to settle the matter yourself, there can be no harm in that ; can there ? I have not broken my word to him, I mean, or behaved otherwise than as a man of honour."

"As regards that, I am no judge, sir," answered John. "To me, this matter is a mere business transaction."

"Just so, with no obligation on either side. And Richard need know nothing about it, need he ? Good afternoon, Mr Milbank, and thank you."

"You have no more bills of mine about you, I suppose ?" inquired John imperturbably.

"No, indeed ; not at present, that is. Gad ! I wish I had ! Good afternoon, sir."

And John was left alone, with the bill in his hand. It was growing dark by this time, and he lit the gas, and held the document against the light. It was an ordinary three months' bill, drawn by Richard, and accepted by himself, and, to all appearance, in his own handwriting : nobody but himself could have detected that it was a forgery. Nor, indeed, could he have detected it, save that he knew he had never signed it. To gain possession of that paper had cost him near a thousand pounds, which he could ill spare, and yet his eyes flashed with pleasure, and his face flushed with triumph, as he looked at it.

"He shall not have her now !" cried he ; "I will send him to jail rather with my own hands."

CHAPTER X.

THE LAST FAREWELL.

RICHARD had no guests at Rosebank that night, but was roistering elsewhere, and, as usual, did not return until the small-hours. What was not so usual was, that he came home quite sober, and when he saw his brother in the parlour sitting up for him, he turned suddenly grave.

"What! not abed yet, John?" said he, astonished; then falling into his ordinary mocking style, "or is it that you have taken to rise an hour earlier? We have long ceased to eat with one another, and now it seems one must be up and about while the other sleeps."

"I have not been to bed, Richard; I have been waiting here these many hours to speak with you."

"That's a pity; if you had sent to old Roberts's, you would have found me any time since dinner. I wish to Heaven you had."

"You have lost your two hundred pounds, then, I conclude?"

"What two hundred pounds?" stammered Richard, setting down the candle he had been about to light, and sinking into a chair. The gas shone full upon his face, and John noticed, for the first time, how much it had lost of health as well as beauty. It could not be said of Richard that he had been no one's enemy but his own; but he had been his own enemy, and would one day slay himself, that was certain. What a

beautiful boy he had been ! How generous, after his lavish fashion, and when he himself had had all he needed ; and how their dead mother had loved him ! Young as John was when she died—a year younger than Richard—such was her confidence in the one, such was her love for the other, that it was to the younger's care that she had commended the elder. " You have the sense and the prudence, John ; and when the time comes to help poor Dick, think of me," she had said, " and do it."

It was ten years ago since they had been uttered, yet he remembered his mother's words as though they had been spoken yesterday, and saw her once more, thin and gray, but still very comely, with her wasted hand—through which the sun seemed to shine—lying lovingly in his own. She was the only woman who had ever loved him, and even she had preferred his brother ; but he was used even then to that.

" The two hundred pounds that Blake gave you in exchange for that forged bill, I mean," said John, not menacingly, but in a grave accusing tone.

" It is a lie," said Richard sullenly.

" What is a lie ? That Blake gave you so much back out of a thousand pounds ? As for the bill, I have seen it with my own eyes."

Richard groaned, and his face fell forward into his hands upon the table, as though a bullet had pierced him.

" Listen to me, Richard. Hours ago, when this thing was first shown to me, I felt very hard towards you. This evil deed was but the climax of a series of ill turns that you had done me, not one of which I had provoked. I have given up everything to you that you have asked, and more ; I have stripped myself bare to supply you, not with necessities, but with superfluities of all kinds. This last act of yours went nigh to ruin me, as indeed it still does. A great temptation seized upon me ; never mind what. I have had

many hours of thought since, and it is over now. Only, you shall not stay here—in England. You must go.”

“*Must* is a hard word, brother!” said Richard, looking up with a fierce scowl.

“The time has gone by for soft ones, Richard.” His voice trembled, but not with tenderness. It had suddenly, and for the first time, struck him that, by avowing to Blake that he had put his own name to the bill, he had placed it out of his power to proclaim it a forgery. Should Richard discover this, he would really have no hold upon him at all. How foolish had he been to buy back that piece of paper, since only while it remained in its late owner’s hands could it be held over Richard *in terrorem*!

“And suppose I said I would not budge, Brother John, what would you do then?”

“Do not ask me. You know what I *could* do. Or, rather, let me say what Dennis Blake—your bosom friend—could do, ay, and *would*—for he told me so, in case he should discover you had forged my name.”

“And has he discovered it?” inquired Richard quickly.

“Not yet. It lies with me whether he will do that or not.”

“I see. He came to you—the scoundrel!—to find that out, and you gave him some evasive answer. He suspects already, in fact, that I forged the bill, but believes that you will buy it of him, and hush up the matter.”

“Yes, for the present it is worth his while to be silent. But if the bare suspicion makes him furious, you may judge what his wrath would be, what sort of mercy you may expect from him, if it should be realised.”

John could hardly believe his ears, when here Richard burst out into loud laughter. “Denny would be pretty mad, that’s true; he don’t like to lose money at any time, not even what has been other people’s and some of this was *lent* money. I

have often thought how long his face would have looked this day three months, when he found that bill waste-paper and Richard Milbank over the seas !”

John stood regarding him with an expression of wonder, pity, and even terror. “Can this be our mother’s son? Thank Heaven, she did not live to see him thus !” was what he was thinking.

“It was a scurvy trick, I own,” continued the other, as if in answer to this look ; “but Denny is a scurvy fellow. I have lost a fortune to him at one thing and another, and he has been always hard upon me, and always ready with his ‘But I have lost to others, Dick,’ as an excuse for being hard ; though he does lose heavily too, sometimes, I am glad to say. You see I didn’t mean to take *you* in, John, but only him. You would have been none the worse, since, of course, when the bill came due, it would have been dishonoured.”

“The bill !” exclaimed John in agony. “Do you think only of the bill ?”

“Well, I thought that would be your own way of looking at it, being a man of business,” was the other’s cool reply. “As for *my* dishonour, I should have been too far away, by that time for any one in Hilton to see me blush.”

“I pray you say no more, Richard. I will pay this thousand pounds, upon condition that you leave this place at once—to-morrow. It will almost ruin me. You are like one who, passing by the work of some toilsome insect, brushes down with wilful foot, in a single instant, what has cost it months of labour to erect.”

“Well, I say again that I didn’t mean to hurt *you*,” returned Richard doggedly. “I’ll leave the country, of course, since you insist upon it ; but you must give a fellow a little time—and a little money.”

“Money ; yes,” returned John ; “I have still a hundred pounds”——

"Beyond the thousand?" interrupted Richard practically.

"Yes; I sold out all I had but yesterday, and you shall have it to the last shilling. But as to time, I will not give you a day, not an hour! ("If he should see Blake," thought John, "and learn that I have bought the bill—that the danger is over—this millstone will be about my neck for ever. He must depart at once.")

"That is sharp work, Brother John; remember, there is Maggie."

As if he did not remember; as if that had not been the temptation against which he had been battling for the last eight hours in the solitary night! Should he forbid him to take Maggie with him, to marry her at all, on pain of being proclaimed a felon? Or should he permit him to escape with her?—the richest prize that the best of men could win.

"I have thought of that, Richard," said he, with icy calm. "She shall follow you to some other town, with her father; and after having become your wife, you shall take her with you beyond seas. But if you have a grain of feeling left, have compassion upon her, brother. Let this be the last of your evil deeds. Do not drag her down with yourself into the gulf of shame and ruin. You talked just now of having escaped beyond the reach of dishonour; *you* might have done so, but not she; and she would have withered at the touch of it. Imagine what Maggie Thorne would have felt, had she learned, though it were ten thousand leagues from hence, that she was the wife of a felon—of a forger!"

He spoke with uncommon vehemence, and yet with a tender entreaty in his tone that was inexpressibly touching. He had given up all he had of worldly goods to benefit this man, but that was nothing in his eyes to what he was giving him now: not that it was his own to give, but still it was what his heart clung to, as a mother to her babe; and he was renouncing

such claim to it as he had in favour of this good-for-naught, and with it all his cherished hopes and dreams of happiness.

"Maggie ought to be greatly beholden to you," was Richard's chilling reply. "I daresay I shall not be a husband worthy of her; not such a model of propriety as you would have been, for instance, if her fancy had chimed with yours; but as to this particular peccadillo of the bill, it would be very unreasonable in her to reproach me with it, since, in point of fact, it was she that did it."

"She that did it!" John leaped from his chair, and uttered the first oath that had ever escaped his lips. "*She* forge that bill, and bring disgrace upon yourself, and her, and me, and on her father! Oh shameless liar!"

"I said nothing about 'bringing disgrace,'" was the sullen reply. "She knew nothing of that, of course, nor indeed, of what she was doing."

"Go on," said John, in a hoarse voice, and gripping the table with both his hands. "How was it?"

"Well, it was very simple. I made up my mind to do the trick, and took the bill to her one morning. We talked of this and that, and presently I brought the subject up of her own accomplishments: her drawing, painting, writing—she can copy anything, you know, as like as life."

"I know!" groaned John.

"Well, then, to please me, she began to imitate the handwriting of her friends: old Lynch's and his wife's; her father's; yours—and when she came to yours, I said: 'Let's puzzle John,' and out I slipped the bill, and she signed *that*, without even asking what it was."

"Richard, I'll hang you!"

"Hands off!" cried Richard, for John had seized him by the collar, "or I *shall* hang for taking your life! Are you mad? Hands off! I say."

"If you leave the house without having copied the letter I

have drawn up here," cried John, almost inarticulate with rage, "it shall be to go to jail; I swear it!"

"What letter?"

"This!" He pushed a sheet of ordinary note-paper before him, with trembling hands. "You undertake, for a certain sum of money—all I have—to leave this town to-morrow, and England in a month. To spare you—for I thought to spare you *then*—I have written nothing about the bill. You are going of your own free-will, you say, to seek your fortune elsewhere. I find this on my table in the morning, by way of farewell."

"Pooh, pooh; you need not put yourself in such a fury. I had agreed to that before."

"Not all of it. You will now depart *alone*."

"What! without Maggie? Never!"

"We shall see. To-morrow you will spend in jail; and when the assizes come you will be tried, and sentenced to twenty years of penal servitude, which will all be passed without Maggie."

"Jack, you dare not do it! What! not buy the bill up when you have the money, and your brother's fate depends upon it? And then to let it all come out in court that Maggie forged the bill! You dare not do it, John, for her sake!"

"By Heaven, I dare, though; and I will! What is one day's torture, or a week's, to the whole lifetime of disgrace and misery that she must needs endure with you! Is any hope of reformation left in one who can make a cat's-paw of the woman he loves, can cause her innocent hand to do his wicked work! No; vile and heartless traitor, you would be her ruin! Sit down, and write, I say! Beneath this very roof, you once compelled a sick and dying man to write for *you*; now write for *me*, or rot in prison!"

Richard took the pen, over-mastered quite by the other's vehement resolve. For the present at least he felt that he

was beaten ; put under foot by the man on whom he had himself so often trodden. How he hated John, and Dennis Blake, and even Maggie herself, now that he was not to have her for his own ! “ Well,” said he sullenly, “ I have written it.”

John took the paper, examined it carefully, then placed it in his pocket-book. “ And now,” said he, “ take this cheque, almost the last shilling that I have to draw, and the last you will ever see of mine. It is on our London bank, so that there is no need to wait at Hilton to cash it. Pack up to-night : take all you please ; but leave this house at dawn, and never let me see your handsome, hateful face again—you”——he looked at him for a moment with unutterable scorn and loathing, then added—“ You jail-bird !”

“ A pretty farewell to your own flesh and blood,” remarked Richard grimly.

“ You are not my flesh and blood, nor any man's,” answered John, turning fiercely round with his hand upon the door. “ The villain who would make a thief of an innocent girl whom he pretends to love, it were flattery to call a man ! I say again, ‘ jail-bird ! ’ ” And with that he closed the door behind him ; and so they parted.

Richard did not go upstairs, but, after a moment's thought, snatched up his hat, and late as it was, left the house and started at a quick pace towards the town.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT THE SERVANTS THOUGHT OF IT.

JOHN MILBANK was one of those men who rise in the morning with the regularity of clock-work, but on the day after his parting with his brother, he was purposely a few minutes late. He was in hopes that Mrs Morden, who, although she had "assistance" in the kitchen, always dusted out the parlour herself, would find the open letter that Richard had left behind him, on the table, and bring it upstairs. But the houskeeper belonged to that fast expiring race of domestic servants who do not read their master's letters, no matter how eligible may be the opportunity. She had seen it, indeed, but had simply removed it to the mantlepice, in order that she might lay the table for breakfast. So John had to come down unsummoned, and discover the document for himself. Then he rang the bell, and, with a very grave face, put the note into Mrs Morden's hand, since to have made her understand its contents by word of mouth would have been also to state them to the parish.

"Oh, the poor dear!" exclaimed she, and wringing her hands, fled instantly up to Richard's room. "He is gone, Master John, he's gone!" cried she, from the top of the stairs. "Oh, do 'ee come and look. He has never been anigh his bed. And yet—thank Heaven for it—he has left his brushes, and scents, and all: he would never have gone away for good without his brushes." This remark was a



sagacious one, and showed that, within a limited range, Mrs Morden was an observer of human nature. Richard was not a dandy ; but he was scrupulous about his personal appearance, and especially careful of his bright, soft, curling hair.

"He says in the letter," observed John, referring to it, "that when I read it he will be far away from Hilton, and never means to return to it again."

"I know he does: but he can't mean it. There's his portmantel just as it was, and even his carpet-bag. Does that look as though he had really meant to leave home? And not a word of good-bye to me, as loved him from a child. Lord, I can see him now, in his velvet frock tied with red ribbons at the sleeves, and looking like an angel! No, no; he didn't know what he wrote, Master John. He was in drink when he did it."

John listened to this babble with attention. The house-keeper was the type of many of her class, and perhaps he was curious to note the effect of Richard's sudden disappearance upon her. If she did not believe he had really gone, others would not do so; and in that case the letter which he had composed with such labour would, for the present, have been written in vain.

"You're trembling, Master John, and you look sadly scared, as well you may; but take you comfort; your brother will come back again. It ain't in nature he should leave his home for good with nothing but the clothes he stood in. He was ill to guide at times; but in an hour like this, one only thinks how sad it would be to miss his handsome face for ever. There, sit ye down on his bed—well, on the chair, if you like it better—and think—think, for they all say you have such a sharp wit—how we are to get the poor lad back again."

John was indeed deadly pale, and trembled even more than his aged companion. The resolution which he had

shown the previous night seemed to have quite forsaken him ; he sat in his brother's room with his head resting on his hand, quite silent, notwithstanding Mrs Morden's impatient queries.

"Can you think of nothing, nothing, Master John, to get him back ? Let me send at all events for the crier. Or shall we put ' Come back ' in the newspaper, as many does that have been so bereaved, ' and all shall be forgotten and forgiven ? ' You did quarrel a bit, I know : you quarrelled a bit last night belike "—John looked up quickly with a flushed, inquiring face. "Well, I meant no offence : it was not your fault, I know, if you did."

"We had no quarrel, woman."

"That's true enough, because it takes two to make one, and you were ever patient with him ; that I will say. But perhaps you spoke to him sharply about the drink. Did you ?"

"No ; he came in about two o'clock in the morning, and we talked of business matters ; then I left him, and afterwards I heard the front door close."

"Ah, then, he will come back again. Let us wait awhile. But when he does, oh, do ye, Master John, keep him off the drink ! It's the cellar as will be his grave, else. Ah, well, you may frown, for you know it even better than I ! Look ye here, sir : I shall go to Mr Thorne's, and find out whether Miss Maggie has any news of him ? Or shall I send the brick-layer yonder—he's come to mend the tool-house wall—round to Mr Linch ?"

"No, no ; not yet : it will be better to wait."

"I daresay you're right, sir ; since, when Master Richard comes back, it would annoy him to find such a fuss made. But, oh, if he does come, save him, save him from himself ! You are master here, they tell me, more than he is, if you had your rights. The strong drink that is left is yours. It

killed my own father—rest his soul—and it is killing *him*. The cards is nothing to it, for it steal health and wealth away alike.”

John started to his feet with sudden eagerness.

“You are right, dame!” said he eagerly. “I have been weak and foolish, where I ought to have been strong. There shall be no more card-playing nor wine-drinking in this house. Come downstairs with me.” When they got into the parlour, he opened drawers and cupboards, and threw every pack of cards that he could find in a heap upon the floor. “Now, put these devil’s books into the fire,” cried he.

“What! the new ones?” exclaimed the old housekeeper. “Why not send them back to the makers?”

“To ruin others as they ruined him? No; burn them all, I say!” When the fire was yet leaping and roaring over its painted prey, he bade her fetch the bricklayer.

“What! are you going to send for Mr Linch, then, after all? Won’t that make Master Richard wild, sir, though, to be sure, not wilder than this;” and she looked at the glowing remnants on the hearth, in extreme dismay.

“Do as I bid you!” cried John, stamping his foot. He was no longer cast down and nervous; and yet, in his vehemence and haste, he was as different from himself as he had been before. When the man left his work, and came into the house—“Bring bricks and mortar,” cried John, “and brick up that cellar door.” He spoke so loud that for once Mrs Morden caught the sense of an observation not addressed to herself.

“But you will take out the wine first, surely, Master John?” remonstrated she.

“To ruin others as it ruined him?” cried John again. “No; brick it up, I say!”

It seemed to Mrs Morden that she had got a new master altogether; quite a Grand Turk of a man. She admired his edicts, and indeed had herself suggested them, and yet

she feared for the scene that was likely to take place when the prodigal should return. This one had always been so patient and submissive, that the other was sure to resent these high-handed acts, though only intended for his good. Nevertheless, it was evident that John was in earnest, and meant to stick by what he had done. Perhaps the old housekeeper's reiterated assurances that Richard would return, made him half believe that he would do so, and this awakened his ire. If he did come back, the great "Who-shall-be-master?" question would, without doubt, have to be tried on a very narrow basis. There were no longer to be two kings in Brentford.

John sat down as usual to breakfast, but not to eat. His rasher of bacon, and even the toast in the rack, remained untasted ; but he swallowed the tea as Richard was wont to do on the morning after a debauch ; yet sometimes on its way to his mouth he would poise the cup in the air, and listen. Now it was the bricklayer come with more bricks to complete his task ; now it was the postman ; now one of those begging folk who, since old Matthew's time, ventured occasionally into the grounds of Rosebank, to take their chance of a curse or a shilling from its reckless tenant : but it was never Richard. Presently, the country lass who helped Mrs Morden came to take away the breakfast things ; John had generally left the house by that time, but this morning he showed no signs of departure.

"What are you bringing in these things for?" She had brought another breakfast service with her.

"For Mr Richard, sir."

"To be sure ; I had forgotten," said he. His brother did not usually rise till noon, or even later, but all was wont to be prepared for him thus early.

"Mrs Morden said I had better lay it, in case, sir." She meant in case of Mr Richard's return ; she had learned about

his departure, of course, from Mrs Morden. Here, too, it seemed that John was curious to have the opinion of others respecting his brother's disappearance, for he began to talk to this girl on the subject. This was the more strange, as he had never said to her three words, perhaps, before: he was shy of addressing young women, even though they were his own servant-girls; while his brother was very affable, and chucked them under their chins.

"Did you hear Mr Richard leave the house last night?"

"No, sir; but I heard him come in."

There was a little pause, during which John slowly wound up his watch, which he had apparently forgotten to do on the previous night: a very rare omission on his part. It seemed as though nothing was to come to pass as usual with him that morning.

"And what time might that have been, Lucy?"

"It struck two, sir, a few minutes after I heard his latch-key in the door."

"You look after Mr Richard's room, do you not? Well, have you ever known him to be out all night—the bed not slept in, I mean, as has happened now?"

"Never, sir. I—I"—

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, sir, nothing; only I do fear as he has come to some mischief. He had always a kind word for a poor girl;" and she suddenly burst into tears. It was nothing more than an emotional outburst in one wholly unaccustomed to conceal her feelings, but it seemed to disconcert John excessively. He sighed heavily, and taking up a book affected to be occupied with its contents till the girl's task was done, and she had left the room. Perhaps he felt it hard, when he was trying to steel his heart against his brother, that such unearned sympathy should be bestowed upon scapegrace

Richard. Presently, he went into the little hall, and took down his greatcoat.

"Are you going out, Master John?" inquired the old housekeeper timidly. "If Master Richard should return home in the meantime, what *shall* we do?" The last clicks of the trowel could be heard from where they stood, coming from the cellar-door.

"If any explanation of my conduct is required, I shall give it myself," was the stern reply.

"And where would you be, sir?"

"Where would I be? Why, at the office, of course! Where should I be?"

"Well, I thought—and no offence, sir, but I think so still—that you should be taking that letter to Mitchell Street" (the street where the Thornes lived). John had got his greatcoat half-way on, and now it seemed he could get it no farther. He turned quite white, and sank down on the lobby-chair, with one arm in its sleeve and one out. "Lord bless ye, sir, don't take on so. It's a heart-breaking errand, no doubt, but somebody must tell her the news, and who so fit as you, being his only brother."

John groaned. "You are quite right, dame," answered he humbly. "I will go at once."

He rose and put on his coat, drew himself up like a soldier on parade, and with the face of one who had volunteered for a forlorn-hope, grave, stern, and resolute, went out upon his errand.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT THE THORNES THOUGHT OF IT.

JOHN'S friends in Mitchell Street were early risers, like himself, and when he arrived there they had already breakfasted. Maggie was below-stairs, making the housekeeping arrangements for the day, but he found the engraver hard at work in the sitting-room.

"Ah, John, I am right glad to see you; you are quite a stranger here!" was his cordial greeting. "But what has happened?" He had taken his microscope from the eye which it obscured, and now regarded his visitor attentively. "I am afraid that it is not good news which has brought you."

"No; it is bad news."

"About Richard, I suppose?" said the old man drily.

"What! have you heard, then, Mr Thorne?"

"I have heard nothing; but nothing will surprise me." The old man got up and carefully closed the door. "Let us spare her if we can. What is it?"

John put into his hand his brother's letter without a word.

"This is all a blind," observed the engraver quietly when he had read it. "It is too good news to be true. Richard will never leave Hilton."

"You really think that?"

"I am sure of that; that is, until he has got every shilling out of you that is to be got, broken my daughter's heart, and

made an old man of me before my time. No, no; there is no such good luck in store for any of us three, you may be sure."

"But why should he have written that letter?"

"I am not at the back of Richard's motives, thank Heaven!" answered the engraver bitterly. "But he has probably some bad end in view. *I shall be far from here when you get this*, he says: that is a melodramatic touch which he has heard at the theatre. He is probably no farther, at this moment, than we are from the slums."

"Don't talk like that, Thorne; I can't bear it. Suppose he should be—have made away with himself, for instance? Mind, I don't say it is probable, but I believe it possible."

"Then you will believe anything. However, since you think it worth while—though, for my part, I expect he is at home by this time—let us discuss the matter. Had he money in his pocket?"

John hesitated a moment, then answered: "Yes: he had a hundred pounds. I gave him a cheque on our London bank for that amount last night."

"Then, if that cheque is not changed within twenty-four hours, I will believe anything you please. A man like Richard Milbank does not try the other world while he has money to spend in this one."

"You are very hard upon Richard."

"Sir, I have an only daughter," was the cold reply. "However, let that pass. If you wish to have my advice, without any comments, you shall have it. When did you see your brother last?"

"About three o'clock this morning. I waited up for him to remonstrate upon certain matters: his reckless expenditure, and the fatal effect it is having upon the business. We had no quarrel; but I spoke out. The time had come for it."

"So I should think," was the quiet rejoinder. "Well, he



was offended, doubtless—though not so much so as to prevent him taking your money ; and now he intends to play on your feelings by a disappearance—until he wants help again. He took everything with him he could lay his hands upon, I suppose ? ”

“ He took nothing—nothing but the clothes he stood up in. ”

“ Indeed ! ” The engraver looked less cynical and more serious.

John watched him with grave attention : if the opinions of Mrs Morden and her “ help ” had had an interest for him, it was no wonder he was curious to hear Herbert Thorne’s view of matters.

“ And you say you had no tiff, John ; he did not fling himself out of the house in a rage ? ”

“ Certainly not. He left it a few minutes after we parted for the night ; and I found this note awaiting me at breakfast. ”

“ *What* note ? ”

It was Maggie’s voice, distinct, authoritative, clear, as she was wont to speak to all but her lover. Her gentle hand had opened the door, her soft step had entered the room, without disturbing the two men : the open letter was on the table, and her quick eye was already fixed upon it.

“ That is Richard’s hand ! ” cried she.

“ Yes, Maggie. You must not be frightened, ” began her father ; but she had already seized the note, and made herself acquainted with its contents.

“ What does it mean ? ” asked she, looking nervously from one to the other. “ Richard gone away, without a word, without a line to me ! I don’t believe it ! ”

“ Just what *I* said, ” observed the engraver dryly.

“ The handwriting is his, but not the words, ” continued she. “ There is some trickery in this. ”

"Nothing more likely," was the engraver's comment; "but you don't suspect our friend here of tricking you, I suppose, Maggie?"

"Indeed not," answered she, holding out her hand, with a faint smile. "Forgive me, John. I am sure that this has distressed you to the core. If anything should go amiss with Richard, there is one man at least whom it would pain, I know—his brother."

It pained him so—or so it seemed, even to think of such mischance—that John could find no words to answer her. He stood stock-still where he had risen, her hand held out to him in vain, though his eyes devoured her.

"Good heavens!" cried she, looking at him anxiously, "do you really think that this was written in earnest? That Richard meant—that"—— She gasped for breath; then hurried frantically on: "You knew him, loved him; blameless yourself, were tender to his faults. Tell me the truth, John; you are concealing something. I can bear the worst; and he—my father yonder"—this with a crooked smile that became her sadly—"would welcome it. Is Richard dead?" She had suddenly fallen on her knees at the young man's feet, her face whiter than milk, her long black hair shaken loose about her shoulders. "Is he dead, is he dead?" sobbed she.

John shook his head; his pale lips parted twice, but no sound came. To see her appealing to him as to one she trusted, confident of his help and truth, yet all for another's sake, overpowered him quite.

"How can he be dead, lass," observed the engraver kindly, "when he tells us in his own hand that he is gone away?"

"It is to *you* I speak, John: answer me, for you know the truth!"

"I only know what is there, Maggie," returned John slowly, and pointing to the letter. "If you ask what is become of



Richard, I cannot tell you ; if you ask my opinion as to whether he has really gone away—I think he has.”

“There were reasons, you see, my girl,” put in the engraver, more anxious now to comfort Maggie than to establish his own theory, “why Richard should have left the town. His affairs were in evil plight ; there is little doubt that he owes money ; and though John here has done his best”——

“He has *not* left the town,” interrupted Maggie excitedly ; “he would never go without taking leave of me ; I am sure of it. I will stake my life upon it !”

“It is like enough you are right, lass. Richard may have returned home by this time, who knows ? John and I will go back now and see.”

“And I will go with you,” said Maggie resolutely.

“Not to Rosebank,” exclaimed John suddenly, the remembrance, doubtless, of his high-handed acts that morning flashing upon him. If she should hear there of the card-burning, or of the cellar-door being bricked up, would she not accuse him of harshness towards her lost Richard ?

“Yes, John, to Rosebank,” answered she calmly. “Why not ? If he is there, that is my place ; if he has gone elsewhere, I will follow him.” She moved towards the door, then stopped, and turned upon them. “Don’t imagine that I will ever give him up. If this is a trick upon me, it will not serve.”

“A trick !” groaned John. But she had already left the room. “Does she think I could stab her in joke ?”

“No, no ; she spoke to me, not to you at all,” said Thorne bitterly. “She thinks that since I have tried fair means in vain to persuade her to break with Richard, that I am now trying foul. It seems strange to you, no doubt, but then you have not a daughter who clung to you for two-and-twenty years, and cast you off in a moment for a—— What ! ready already, lass ? Let us go, then.”

Maggie had been about half a minute in fleeing upstairs and back again, and had contrived to put bonnet and shawl on on the return journey. When love demands it, a woman can be quick, even over her toilet.

The three went out together, the father and daughter arm-in-arm, and John taking his place on the side remote from Maggie. He was never forward to be near her. They had not gone far, when Thorne whispered in his ear : "There goes a man, who, if he would, could tell us as well as any where your brother is."

John, being in deep thought, looked up with a quick start, almost of alarm. "What man?"

"Dennis Blake. See! he has caught sight of us, and wishes to avoid a meeting. For my part, I don't like to be seen speaking to such a fellow, else he is very likely to know something."

Maggie's quick ear, sharpened by anxiety, overheard this. "If you are ashamed to speak with anybody about Richard, I am not," said she, withdrawing her hand from her father's arm. But another hand was laid upon her wrist, as she was about to hurry after Blake's retreating figure.

"No, Maggie," said John firmly; "you shall not speak to that man, neither now nor ever; I will do it." And off he started with rapid strides.

Since, without running, it was clear that his pursuer could not be evaded, Blake slackened his pace, and suffered John to come up with him. His face, which the latter, of course, since he was behind him, could not see, was a study of the baser emotions—dislike, apprehension, and duplicity. Lavater would have said: "That man is a scoundrel, but he possesses a soul, for he has a secret on it."

His shifty eyes seemed to grow smaller as John came up with him, or perhaps it was that his frowning brow hid them more and more.

"Ha ! is that you, Mr Milbank ? Good-day to you ;" and he smiled as a dog does, showing his teeth.

"Good-day. I have something to say to you, Mr Blake. An unpleasant affair has happened : my brother Richard is missing."

"Missing ?" His look of surprise was perfect, if it was not genuine : Dennis Blake had another talent in him besides that of playing short whist. He was an actor spoiled.

"Yes ; he left home about two o'clock this morning, *with the intention of calling upon you.*"

Here both men's faces were well worth looking at : his who put the query was searching, resolute, menacing, and even desperate—its colour a dead white. The expression of the other was variable : flying clouds of doubt obscured it ; its hue changed from red to white, from white to red, as quickly as the colours in a kaleidoscope. "I have not seen your brother since the day before yesterday—not since I saw *you*," said he at last.

John Milbank drew a long, deep breath ; the relief of finding that Richard had not discovered that the thousand-pound bill had been already honoured was doubtless intense.

"And you never heard him express any intention of leaving home ?" This in the tone with which a counsel puts his last question—always a comparatively unimportant one—to a witness who has done his cause good service.

"Well, I can't say that," was the unexpected reply. "I have heard him say he was sick and tired of Hilton, but that, of course, he was bound by circumstances to remain here."

"Then, if he had money in his pocket, and was no longer bound, you think it not unlikely my brother might have taken such a step ?"

John spoke with great calmness—not carelessly, but with all his usual deliberation ; yet there was an eagerness in his eyes which he could not quench.

"Such a step as to leave Hilton?" answered Blake quietly. "I should think nothing was more probable. "I don't say, however, but that he may turn up again pretty soon, you know. Let us hope he may."

"Thank you."

It was with quite a friendly nod that John returned to his companions, for in truth the person who had given him most comfort that morning—and never had he needed it more—had been Mr Dennis Blake.

"Well, man, what news?" cried Thorne, who by this time was but a few paces distant.

"No news: Blake has not seen Richard since yesterday."

"John," said Maggie solemnly, "I watched that man's face while he was talking to you, and I am sure he was not speaking truth."

"It is possible," returned John quietly. "Time will show."

CHAPTER XIII.

DISENCHANTMENT.

RICHARD MILBANK did not return to Rosebank either that day or the next, and by that time all Hilton knew it. His disappearance, though by no means mysterious, since he had announced his intention to depart, was a much-debated topic. At the *Sans Souci*, among the older members, there was a good deal of lifting the eyebrows and shaking of heads : " There was something more behind, you might depend upon it, which would not be long in coming out." The less prudent prophets even entreated their friends, in whispers, to mark their words : " It would be presently discovered that John Milbank was ' let in ' for a heap of money " through his scapegrace brother. The younger men were (as they imagined) more charitable ; it was their openly-expressed opinion that Dick had been signalled elsewhere by the flutter of a petticoat, and that they would see him back again in ten days, or a fortnight at farthest. He was impressionable, but his fervour was apt to cool within a very limited time. In the meanwhile, he was much missed, and genuinely regretted, in the card-room, notwithstanding that he had left no debts behind him. His handsome face had been pleasant to look upon, his reckless talk had had a genial glow about it, though but too often from forbidden fires. Some even held him as witty as old Roberts, though he had not that dry manner with him which makes a little joke go such a long way. It was agreed on all

hands that Dennis Blake knew more about Milbank's whereabouts than he chose to tell, and he was cross-examined accordingly ; and since he was foolish enough to take this in ill part, it was persisted in.

"Is it true, Denny, that you have quite ruined him, and given him back a little money to take him beyond seas—as they say old Crockford used to do for *his* victims?"

"No, no," said another ; "Blake would never do that. His favourite goose having laid its last golden egg, he has killed him, and sold the body."

Whereupon, the economist referred to would scowl and mutter, and in his excessive irritation even play a wrong card. This he could ill afford to do, for, now that Dick was gone, he got very little plunder, but, on the contrary, like the ringed pelican, had daily to disgorge to others the prey that he had laboriously collected for his own benefit.

Outside the club, Richard was missed also in many quarters. Tradesmen of all sorts—tailors, bootmakers, horse-dealers—were making the most anxious inquiries about him. A jeweller wrote to Mr Thorne to inform him that a golden cross set with turquoises, that his daughter was wearing, and which had come out of his establishment, had not been paid for. To have to return a love gift under these circumstances was "rubbing the gilt off" with a vengeance, but Maggie complied with the suggestion without a murmur. It was thought a hard thing by the jeweller that John Milbank did not offer to pay for it, which Thorne was by no means in a position to do.

As time went on, and still no news came of the missing man, public opinion set in against his brother upon his account—that he did not pay Richard's debts ; though, as a matter of fact, he had not the money. His business, for the present, was crippled, and indeed was going on on credit, though there was little doubt of its eventual recovery.

Thorne did not hesitate to tell his daughter of all this ; but

he might have spared his breath : while her Richard was absent, and his fate unknown, all talk to his disparagement was wasted. She did not believe that he had gone away from her of his own free will, but feared for his personal safety, and while such an anxiety was on her mind, what mattered tradesmen's bills !

At last a day arrived which was destined to give her father a tremendous advantage.

"Maggie," said he one morning, as they were at their work together, "what would make you believe that Richard had given you up ?"

She was so pale now that she could scarcely grow paler ; but instead of pursuing her occupation, as it was her wont to do when the engraver pressed this theme, she desisted from it at once ; her trembling fingers had refused their office.

"You have some news, father ; what is it ?"

"That cheque has been paid into the London bank."

"I don't understand," said she faintly. She did understand, poor soul, being well enough acquainted with such matters.

"Why, the hundred pounds that John gave to his brother on the night of his departure. It was an open cheque, but payable to order ; and it has just come in with Richard's signature on the back of it. A man must be alive, you know, to sign a cheque. It is plain, therefore, that Richard is alive."

"Thank God !" murmured Maggie humbly ; but it was not a fervent ejaculation ; the alternative, indeed, was not in her case to be fervently welcomed.

"It was very stupid of John," continued the engraver, "not to stop the cheque ; but I suppose he was afraid of offending his brother. He has already telegraphed, it seems ; and the reply from the bank is that it was presented by a stranger ; so there is no clue. Only the fact is now certain that Richard is alive, and, for reasons of his own—and I have

no doubt very good ones—has no wish to have any communication with you."

There was a long pause, then Maggie said: "Can I see the cheque?"

"It is here, my child; I asked John to send it for your own satisfaction."

Her satisfaction! Does the ship-captain use that phrase when he writes to tell some widowed mother that her only lad has perished in the pitiless sea? If Richard had really signed that cheque, he was not dead, indeed, but it was almost certain proof that he had deserted her. She took it from her father, and, with practised and tearless eye, examined the endorsement. It was her lover's—or what once had been her lover's—hand: no forger could have ever deceived her *there*.

"Are you convinced at last, my poor lassie?" inquired the engraver tenderly.

"That Richard signed this cheque? Yes, father."

"And does not the other thing follow, that he has given you up? Or will nothing ever make you believe that?"

"Nothing; unless I hear it from his own lips." She rose, and walked slowly to the door; then dragged herself upstairs to her own room; and having shut herself in, dropped into a chair, and burst into a passion of tears.

"O Richard, Richard, you are breaking a heart that only beats for you!"

She came down an hour afterwards and resumed her work as though nothing had happened: her eyes, her ears, were quick as ever, but all that they took in shaped itself with reference to her lost lover; the "terminable" ink, in experiments with which her father chanced to be engaged that morning, reminded her of Richard's vows—so fixed and stable to all seeming, and yet so unstable and fleeting; nay, the parallel was even more complete, for in neither case was there

any fading away, but, in a moment, all was blank on heart and paper. The very wintry wind that huddled the snow against the window-pane seemed to breathe cold farewells, not from the grave, but worse, from lips estranged !

Herbert Thorne knew nothing of such thoughts. He had forgotten, or perhaps had never known, what grief women are capable of concealing ; what mortal wounds they will hide from kith and kin, rather than confess their pain, when a once-loved hand has inflicted them. When Maggie said that she would never credit that Richard had forsaken her till he told her so himself, her father had believed her.

If this man should die, then, she would be a mourner for him through all her youthful days ; and if he lived, and should return to claim her promise, she would be a mourner still—for her own sake. Beneath the engraver's methodical manner and outspoken ways there lay a heart, limited, indeed, in the sphere of its affections, but tender as a girl's towards all it did love, and that all was Maggie. He had borne misfortune, disappointment in his most cherished hopes, and bitter humiliations in his calling, without a murmur ; but they had set their mark upon his being : he felt old age creeping on apace, and something worse than old age ; he had had warnings, unrevealed to Maggie, but which a doctor had translated for him, that a day might come, even before the appointed Fatal One, when his deft fingers should ply no more their busy work ; when blessed toil should no more offer its cup of Lethe ; when he should be no longer the bread-winner, but only the bread-eater. It had been his one desire to see his daughter placed on some safe coign of 'vantage—the wife of some well-to-do and honest man, so that the wave of Want should never reach her, and chill her with its spray, when he himself should be powerless to avert it. And now this modest hope lay shattered within him. Maggie was thoroughly resolved to sacrifice herself to an idol, with front

of brass and feet of clay—to throw herself away upon a selfish reprobate. He had felt very bitter about it, as well as sad, but the bitterness was over now, and the sadness had turned to blank despair. If he had told her all this, she would perhaps have flung her arms about him, and confessed her error. But he was reticent by habit, and, besides, too worn and broken in spirit to risk a new repulse. Silence may be golden, but how many a life has been worse then lost when one word of Nature's promptings would have saved it !

It was Maggie's custom every afternoon to repair to Rosebank, generally in her father's company, about the time when John returned home from business, to inquire if there were any news of Richard ; and, at the usual hour, she rose, and put on her shawl and bonnet.

"Won't you go with me, father ? I am sure you have been working long enough : you look tired and pale. It has ceased snowing, and the fresh air will do you good."

"Not to-day, Maggie."

His words were always few and decisive, but if her thoughts had not been elsewhere—hoping against hope that John might have something comforting to tell her—she would have noticed that his tone was very tremulous. When she left the house, he went to the window, and followed her with his eyes to the corner of the street ; then sighing, resumed his seat, but not his toil. He sat him down to think—but to think was to be full of sorrows and leaden-eyed despairs. We lavish our pity, both in life and books, upon the disappointments of youth and the unhappiness of lovers ; but we ought to reserve it rather for those who, without the strength of youth to support them, have lost not only happiness, but hope itself.

Maggie was a rapid walker, and when she had cleared the town, she saw before her on the road a woman going in the same direction : her steps were slow because of some burden

that she carried and she seemed to progress with difficulty. Where could she be going, thought Maggie, so late in the dull, dark afternoon, and when the laden clouds were menacing more snow so unmistakably? At each of the scattered villas on the way, she expected to see her stop, and it was with genuine compassion that she observed her pass by the last save Rosebank itself, whereby she knew she must be bound on a long journey. By this time she had overtaken her, and perceived that she was about her own age, and very pretty, but painfully delicate, and evidently of frail and feeble frame. Her breast was the cradle of a little babe, whose peevish cries she was vainly endeavouring to soothe.

"I hope you are not going far this bitter evening," said Maggie kindly.

"I am not going far," echoed the girl sullenly, and huddling her cloak about her, as though with some vague intention of concealing her living burden.

The movement was not lost upon Maggie, who hurried on, and presently reached Rosebank. As she turned to enter the gate, she looked back, and saw that the girl had stopped also. Perhaps she had meant to beg at the cottage, and would now be deterred from doing so by seeing her enter? Maggie glanced at the threatening sky, and her heart smote her for the evanescence of her pity for this poor creature and her innocent child; and, instead of ringing the bell, she walked hastily back, and addressed her.

"Did you want anything, my good girl?" said she. "I am known at yonder house, and can procure you there at least a meal, if you stand in need of it."

"I am not hungry, thank you," was the cold reply.

"But see! it has already begun to snow again; will you not step in for shelter till the storm is over?"

"I am used to bad weather—and worse!" answered the

girl, with a trembling of the lips that was meant for a cynical smile.

"But your child?" urged Maggie tenderly.

The girl burst into tears. "Yes; my child has a right to shelter in that house," answered she with vehemence; "and I am going there to claim it."

"Of whom?" inquired Maggie faintly.

"Of its father. You say you are known there. Can you tell me, then, whether Mr Milbank has returned?"

"Mr Milbank!" Maggie's heart felt like a stone; her limbs trembled beneath her. "Which Mr Milbank?"

"Are there two?" answered the girl simply. "I only know of one. I have not seen him for weeks, nay, months; and I have been ill and weak, and dared not write, and now they tell me he has gone away, no one knows whither."

"Do you mean Richard Milbank?"

"Oh, yes. Who else? You are known at Rosebank, you say, and must know him."

"Yes; I know him," answered Maggie gravely.

It had taken her years to do so, but the recognition had come at last: he stood before her a faithless breaker of women's hearts.

"Have I done mischief?" cried the girl in affrighted tones.

"Are you his sister, that you look so pained and angry?"

"No; I am nothing to him, nor he to me."

"But you can tell me if it is true that he has left us—his babe, the very image of himself—look you!" She drew her cloak aside, that Maggie might look upon the child; and she did so, but with such a hard and searching gaze, that the girl shrunk back from her, exclaiming, "You would not hurt him?"

"God forbid!" said Maggie hoarsely.

"Ah, you are kind, and would not tread us underfoot, as some do. I am a sinful girl; but then I loved him so, and he

loved *me*, or else he is perjured." Then, with haggard face and eager eyes, she added, "Is he really gone? Can he have deserted us for ever, think you?"

"It is possible," answered Maggie slowly. "He has deserted others."

"Nay; but not like me and this one. He was his father, and he should have been *my* husband; a score of times he vowed to marry me. I would not come here begging to his door, to shame him thus, but for his own child's sake; for if the mother starve, the babe must die."

"You shall not starve," said Maggie.

"Will his people yonder help us, think you?"

"I don't know. You must not go there: come back with me, and show me where you live."

"It is a very poor place," hesitated the other; "they have turned us out of the rooms he took for me."

"No matter how poor it be, let me see it." And yielding to her stronger will, the sobbing girl turned back towards the town.

Within an hour of leaving her father's house, Maggie stood once more before its door; but in that time a revolution had taken place within her mind that years of ordinary events could not have effected. It was as if to the wound of which she had languished the actual cautery had been suddenly applied, and, though still suffering tortures, she felt in a manner cured. To think that all the while Richard had been paying his vows to her, and protesting his fidelity, he had been promising marriage to another, was a reflection that turned her wholesome blood to gall. The very remembrance of his caresses was hateful to her, now that she knew that they had been lavished elsewhere. Ignorant of the world, though so sagacious in more than one of its useful callings, his infidelity appeared to her something monstrous and abnormal.

Had her position in life been a more lowly one, or if it had been higher, or if her bringing-up, even in her own condition, had been less exceptional, she would have been spared the shock of this revelation, and also, perhaps, would have missed its lesson ; but her knowledge of life was as inferior to that of most girls of her own age as her intelligence was superior. How different she was from them may be best gathered from the fact that, as soon as the sudden passion-flush had passed, and reason had time to assert itself within her, she forgave her unconscious rival, or rather confessed to herself that she had nothing to forgive. Her first impulse had been to get the girl away from Rosebank, in order to save herself from a public mortification ; but her honest heart had since been moved towards her with genuine pity. If she herself had been deceived by Richard—against whom every voice was warning her—was this poor girl to be blamed for having become his victim ? Nay, if her tale was true, might not Richard, had it not been for her own sake—she would not say “for the love of her,” for she now ignored it—have redressed her wrong, and married her, so that in a manner was not she herself to blame for this poor girl's desertion ? Henceforth, at all events, she would do her best to serve her and her innocent child. In good actions, it has been said, the most wretched of mankind can find some comfort ; our own cup of bitterness seems not so bitter when we strive to make that of others more palatable. Moreover, terrible as was this revelation to herself, the effects of it, she could not but reflect, would be welcome to her father, to whose loving appeals she had hitherto refused to listen ; she would henceforward make up for her undutifulness by obedience to his every wish ; indeed, for the future, what wishes could she ever entertain not in accordance with his own ? Side by side they would work together, undissociated by any secret thought : she would give herself

heart and soul to him, sympathise with his aims, second them all she could, and, if they should be successful, strive to find some happiness in his triumph.

Reader, has it not sometimes happened to you, when you have had occasion to resolve particularly upon a course of conduct, when your plans are laid, and the circumstances for which they are prepared lie, as it seems, plainly before you—the same as they did yesterday and the day before, without a hint of a change—that all this forethought has gone for nothing, or only for what thought is worth which can never be put in practice? Does it not seem, I say, as though Fate were jealous of feeble man's proposals, and resolute to flout them? While Maggie has her hand upon the door of home, where all that happens is known to her so well, and goes on with such methodical iteration, an empty carriage drives swiftly up to it, and stops. "Is this Mr Thorne's house, please, miss?" asks the coachman.

"Yes," says she, surprised, but not alarmed; why should she be? "Have you any message for him?"

"No, miss; but I have got my orders to wait here for my master, Dr Naylor, who has been summoned to see him."


"Summoned to see him! What about?" cried Maggie, ringing nervously at the bell.

"Well, I don't rightly know, miss; but the man from the chemist's shop came running down to us, ten minutes ago, to say as Mr Thorne in Mitchell Street was took with a stroke. He told our cook it was summut of paralysis."

CHAPTER XIV.

STRUCK DOWN.

WE hear much of the contrasts between rich and poor, and, Heaven knows, they are sharply defined and unmistakable enough ; but there is another contrast not so defined, and therefore not so patent, in the social positions of our fellow-men, but which in the end is often as deplorable. This is caused by the presence or absence of what is vulgarly termed "an independence ;" that is, the possession of some sum of money, small or great, which is their own, and upon which they can fall back for support in case of need. The barrister in good practice lives, during the holidays, next neighbour, at some seaside resort, to the country gentleman, who has chanced to bring his wife and children to the same place. The way of living of their two families is almost identical ; you would set them down as being in the enjoyment of somewhat similar incomes ; and very likely it may be so. Yet the difference between their pecuniary positions is in reality as great as, perhaps greater than, that which exists between the barrister and the humble lodging-house keeper of whose apartments he is the temporary tenant. For, if he sickens, or his practice falls away, poverty and want soon begin to press him sore ; while, if he dies, ruin too often seizes upon those he has so tenderly nurtured, only to feel their fate the harder when it thus befalls. On the other hand, should the country gentleman decease, his girls have only his personal



loss to deplore ; it is not the prop of the house that has been snatched away from them ; in the matter of material prosperity they are as they were ; while the daughters of their neighbour are no more their equals, but will have to work for scanty pay, for strangers, from youth to age. The occurrence is so common, that it excites but little remark. "I see Brown of the Chancery Bar, or Brown the doctor, or Brown the vicar (as the case may be), is dead," we say : "I fear those nice girls of his will be left but badly off."

Yet, but yesterday, Brown to all outward seeming was as prosperous as his friend Brown the county magistrate, and it would have been the height of presumption to pity his girls. Of course folks say, "Why did he not insure his life?" and probably to some small extent—less than he should have done, but not much less, perhaps, considering what responsibility he would have incurred in undertaking a great premium—he did insure it. At all events, that little provision does but serve to break the fall of the suddenly descending Browns.

This reflection, indeed, would sadden us more if the downfall was less sudden and complete, since, as it is, they all go "under," as it were, immediately ; the ranks of society close up, and little or nothing more is heard of them, unless, indeed, one of their number happens to be fortunate enough to be taken into the family circle (yet not quite inside) of the country Browns—as their governess. This sad difference of lot does not commonly take place in the professional class while the breadwinner is yet alive ; he may fail in brain or health a little without losing his means of livelihood altogether—indeed, in the case of Brown the vicar, they remain to him even if he be bedridden, and in other cases the invalid's friends and associates "rally round him," and something is done for the afflicted man ; but in the lower middle class—that of the mechanic who works for weekly wage—a serious illness is almost as bad as a death-blow. There is but one

step from competence to penury. It is small comfort, even to a selfish man thus situated, to reflect that this misfortune is liable to occur not to him alone, but to nineteen-twentieths of those in his own calling. The little "independence" is almost unknown among them, while the advantages of the "benefit club" belong to a class below.

From the moment, therefore, that Herbert Thorne was stricken down by sudden sickness, the fortunes of the little household began to collapse rather than to wane. His weekly income had been better than that of many an unbeneficed clergyman, though it was largely taxed to defray the expenses of scientific experiments ; and now it was absolutely *nil*. There was no incoming at all, but all was outgoing—save what Maggie, who had the duty of sick-nurse to perform, could earn with her hands. It is the consideration of cases of this kind—which are as common as the toothache—which makes one smile scornfully when the man of "independent" means talks about "hard times," for he can never know what they are.

Maggie was very clever and assiduous ; did not waste her wits or wages, like her father, upon impracticable theories ; would have been the best helpmate and home-ruler that a diligent man could have taken to his bosom ; and could have maintained *herself* at all times were health but granted to her ; but the burden that was now cast upon her willing shoulders was greater than they could bear. The rent of the house, for one thing, would have swallowed up half her gains ; and there were her father and the servant to feed, and the doctor to pay, and—— But the list of what has to be provided for even in the most humble household is a long one, and would weary the comfortable reader ; albeit every item of it, as it flashed on poor Maggie's mind, was not merely a wearisome detail, but inflicted a pang as real and painful as the most sentimental woe ever endured by a heroine of romance.

She had found her father prostrate and powerless on his bed, unable even to shape her name, though he looked at her with an eloquence of love and sorrow that went beyond all power of words. And at the end of the terrible three months that followed, so far from being "himself again," of which Dr Naylor had given her hopes, he had not yet wholly recovered the use of his limbs—the power of getting about and helping himself—while, whether that once deft and diligent right hand should ever regain its cunning at all, was more than doubtful. Most fortunately, what work Maggie could do could be done at home, and she had toiled by the sick man's bed all day without leaving him for an hour. He was not on any account to be "worried" or made "to think," the doctor had said; so her talk had been always cheerful; she had sung to him his favourite songs—which her mother had taught her when a child—as soon as he was strong enough to hear them without tears; she had read to him also, whenever he had felt inclined, making up for the hours thus idly spent by work in her own room at night; and John Milbank had called every day, and sat with the old man, especially through that time when Maggie was compelled to go out to dispose of the proceeds of her handiwork, or for health's sake for a breath of fresh air. It was a hard life for her, yet in some respects, like all lives spent in the path of duty, it had not been without benefit to herself. She had learned from it that her affection for Richard had not only been misplaced, but selfish; and though it still existed within her, it was to be from henceforth subordinate to filial duty. Suppose she had married, and been forbidden by her husband to tend this beloved parent—would all Richard's protestations of devotion to herself, even had they been genuine, have consoled her, or acquitted her conscience for that undutiful desertion? The doctor's questions as to the cause of her father's seizure had quivered like a barbed arrow in her very heart. Did he

suffer from any mental trouble? Was he grieving for a disappointment, or *had he been for any length of time in expectation of some calamity?* She answered in the negative, but something within her seemed to protest against her words. Without acknowledging to herself that she had been the cause of his misfortune, her whole soul was bent upon reparation; and in the practice of self-sacrifice she had found a balm for many things. Only at first, the shadow of the coming Want, of the inevitable hour in which her slender purse should not contain a coin, threw gloom upon her soul. What gloom, then, must it needs be throwing upon him who, lying upon his sick-bed with helpless hands, had little else to occupy his thoughts! Yet, since he never spoke of it, and always had a smile for her, she had begun to hope that Fate, while striking him with so pitiless a hand, had deadened her father's capabilities of pain in this respect, and that, like a child, he took all that was given to him, without concern as to the source from which it came; that Nature herself had backed the doctor's orders, that the invalid was not to be "made to think." It was not long, however, before she was undeceived. On the very first day that the engraver was moved downstairs into the sitting-room, he looked about him with a surprised and troubled air.

"Maggie, darling," he whispered feebly, "how is it that all is here as when I left it?"

"Why not, dear father? What should not be here?"

He pointed to the costly scientific instruments, which he loved as Norman William loved the tall deer. "These would have brought money, darling, and you must have needed it sadly. How is it you have managed without it?"

Maggie's cheek showed a faint blush in spite of herself. "I borrowed a little," answered she; "we are to repay the loan as soon as you are able to work again."

The engraver looked at his wasted right hand, still dis-



obedient to his will. "That is but poor security," sighed he ; "there is but one man that I know of who would have advanced us anything upon it."

"Well, father, he has done it, so what matters? Dr Naylor says you are not to worry yourself about business affairs."

"It does not worry me to talk of John Milbank ; it does me good."

Maggie blushed deeper than ever ; his words had a meaning for her which she strove to ignore.

"Tell me all about it, darling, from the first."

"When you were first taken ill, father, I could think of nothing else but that, and the question of how we should pay our way did not trouble me ; besides, the doctor told me that you would soon be well again. But presently one little bill dropped in, and then another ; and we began to owe for things that we had been used to settle for every week. Lucy's wages fell due, too, and it seemed right to pay them before anything ; and, small as they were, they took my last shilling."

"My poor Maggie !"

"Then the man called for the quarter's rent, and though he was civil enough, I knew it would not be so the next time ; and others called who were not so civil. I had no idea how hard some folks could be."

"But others were kind, Maggie ; tell me about that."

"John was very kind, father. He pretended that the price of goods, such as I supply, was raised in the market, and offered to dispose of them at higher prices ; but I saw through that"—here her voice began to tremble a little—"and declined the aid that was but alms, however delicately bestowed."

"And about the loan, Maggie?" continued the old man (for he looked old indeed now) after a long silence, during

which he regarded her, while she worked on as usual, with yearning eyes. "How was it he came to lend this money?"

"I think he saw that I was greatly troubled, father; and once, when I went out to pay some one, who had been very importunate, an instalment of his bill, I found the whole had been already settled by an unknown hand. When I taxed John with having paid it, he at first denied it, and then insisted that he was your debtor. You had lent his uncle money, he said, years ago, through which he had made his fortune, and since he had done so, and made John his heir, John owed it *you*."

"But the money was paid, Maggie."

"So I told him, father; but he answered that the obligation remained, and that, at all events, he must insist on your accepting from him a loan to the same amount as the debt originally incurred. I was very loath, but he urged, what was but too true, that money must be had somehow; and if I parted with your books or instruments, they would be sold at a great sacrifice, and that, besides, you would be crippled for the want of them when you should recover. So at last I took the money."

"Why, that was a hundred pounds, lass! I know not how it can ever be repaid," added he, looking at her wistfully.

"You were not to worry yourself about that, he said," answered Maggie hastily, "but to repay it by instalments when it suited you; and, besides, I have spent but very little of it; only, I thought it better to accept John's offer, handsome as it was, rather than be applying to him again and again, if we should need to do so. It is so unpleasant to talk about money matters, even if one's friend is ever so kind—and, indeed, I think John was as embarrassed as myself."

"Don't you think that was because he was dealing with you, Maggie? When he comes to mention it to me, he will have no such shyness."



"Very likely, father," answered she quietly; "a man understands a man so much better than he understands a woman."

Then Maggie worked on in silence with nimble fingers, and the old man moved slowly about the room among his favourite instruments, touching this and that in an absent and preoccupied manner.

"John tells me that nothing has been heard of his brother, Maggie," said he at last; "you have heard nothing yourself, I conclude—no letter, nor anything?"

"I have heard nothing, nor do I expect to hear," was her calm reply.

"And if you did?" asked the engraver with significance.

"If I did, it would make no difference, father; I would never marry Richard now. Don't ask me why," added she with vehemence; "don't speak to me upon the subject, if you would spare me pain; but, if it is any comfort to you to know it, Richard"—Here something seemed to choke her speech, and she laid her hand upon her bosom as if in pain.

"What! you love him no longer?" cried the engraver with eager joy.

"I did not say that," exclaimed Maggie passionately; "I wish to Heaven I could! But do not fear that I will ever be his wife."

The old man tottered towards her, and stooping down, kissed her bowed forehead. "The doctor need not come again to see me, darling; your words have done me more good than all his drugs."

If it was so, the cure was obtained at the expense of the physician: as the mesmerist gives his own vital force to eke out that of his patient, so Maggie, it seemed, had parted with heart and hope to give them to her father, for the girl had fainted at her desk.

CHAPTER XV.

CHAMPIONED.

A FEW days after the avowal from his daughter's lips, which had made the engraver very literally "another man"—brought the light back to his eye, the flush of health to his wasted cheek, and even returning steadiness to his still wayward right hand—Mr Linch, the lawyer, paid them a visit. Without having absolutely neglected them during their late troubles, he had not been a frequent visitor in Mitchell Street, and his arrival on that particular morning astonished them considerably, for it happened to be the Sabbath, of which that gentleman was a very strict observer.

"I am glad to see you up and about again, Mr Thorne. Miss Maggie, I hope you are well?"

The difference of manner with which the new-comer delivered those two sentences was remarkable: the former was spoken in as genial a tone as the sacredness of the day permitted, the latter was cold and formal. The sensitive ear of the engraver at once detected this. He knew that the speaker thought ill of Maggie for her fidelity to Richard Milbank, and judged her with sectarian narrowness, and, though he had at one time lamented her obstinacy to this very man, he resented—now that she was obstinate no longer—any show of reproof towards her.

"I believe Maggie is more of an invalid, Mr Linch, than myself," observed he gravely: "in tending me, she has, I

fear, injured her own health, and has no more appetite than a bird."

"There are some birds—such as cormorants," remarked Maggie cheerfully, "who have very good appetites, father."

"Yes; but you don't eat like a cormorant, my darling, but more like a canary; and the consequence is, you are worn to a shadow."

"Miss Maggie looks pale and delicate, doubtless," said Mr Linch dryly. "Could I have a few minutes in private with you, Thorne?"

"In private? Well, I have no secrets from Maggie; but"—

"It is no secret, unfortunately," interrupted the lawyer; "but I think it would be more advisable to say what I have to say to you in your daughter's absence."

"Is there any news—I mean, from Rosebank?" exclaimed Maggie suddenly. "If so, Mr Linch, I can bear to hear it; nay, I *claim* to hear it."

Mr Linch returned her appealing look with one of extreme surprise. "Claim to hear it, young woman!" returned he with irritation; "the law knows no such claim: it is not as if you were an accused party. Upon my life, Thorne, I don't know what your daughter means."

"You must be very dull, then," said the engraver tartly. "She wishes to know if there is any news of Richard Milbank."

"No, no," answered the lawyer hastily; "none at all, I assure you—none at all. It is on quite another matter that I wish to have a few words with your father."

Maggie at once withdrew, and left the two men alone together.

"It is the most extraordinary thing that your daughter should have asked that question," gasped the little lawyer: "my head was so full of certain news from Rosebank, that

I could think of nothing else. Richard Milbank had no place in my mind, because it was wholly occupied with John."

"What about John?" asked the engraver with anxiety. "I thought, when you rang the bell like that, it was sure to be he."

"Well, John has got into a scrape. You would think he was the last man in the world to have done it, but he has come into—yes—collision with the police," said Mr. Linch, bringing out this painful intelligence with a gasp of desperation.

"With the police!" echoed the engraver, astounded. "What! has John been drinking?"

"No, indeed; perhaps it would be better for him in this case if he had. He has committed a very serious assault, without drunkenness to excuse it, upon Mr. Dennis Blake."

"Well, he was right so far—I mean in his selection of a victim," observed the engraver grimly. "It was about Richard, of course; and, for my part, I have always held that that fellow Blake knows more about John's brother than he chooses to tell. He was very flush of money just at the time he disappeared—though he soon got quit of it at cards, they say—and if there was foul play anywhere"——

"It was not about Richard that the quarrel arose," interrupted the lawyer gravely, "or else I should not have come here to-day. It was about somebody dearer and nearer to you than he, Thorne: it was about your daughter Maggie."

"I have heard something of this before," said the engraver, with an air of extreme annoyance. "I know John means us well, and more than well, every way; but he should not pay attention to the idle talk of every good-for-naught, nor think it necessary to correct him for letting his tongue run. It does more harm than good to those he would stand up for."

"Blake said a very aggravating thing this time, however,"

replied the other, looking at the engraver very fixedly; "and supposing it was all lies, as I hope it was, I don't blame John—speaking as a man, of course, not as a lawyer—for taking the matter up. But Blake was drunk, it seems; indeed, if he had not been he would not have dared to say what he said; and John has beaten him within an inch of his life. I say again, it is a serious business. The case will have to come to-morrow before the magistrates; and if it should turn out that Blake was only telling the truth, or what he believed to be the truth"——

"The truth about *what*?" inquired the engraver impatiently. "You don't mean to say, I hope, that it was anything disgraceful, which might yet be true of my Maggie?"

"Now, my dear Thorne, it is no use your putting yourself in a passion; I have come here to get at the facts of the case, whatever they may be, for I shall have to meet them to-morrow. Mind, I assert nothing of myself; but if what Blake said was true, Richard Milbank has left a legacy of shame and wrong behind him, such as my heart bleeds to think of, for *your* sake. There is a child in Poulter's Alley out at wet nurse"——

"Silence!" exclaimed the engraver, in sharp, shrill tones, and rising from his chair as hastily as his lame limbs would let him. "You do not know Herbert Thorne's daughter. Maggie!" cried he, going out upon the landing, and calling up the stairs, "come down here, lass; thou'rt wanted. Not a word more, Mr Linch, I beg, until she comes."

"It is an unnecessary ordeal," commenced the lawyer; but the next moment the girl stood in the doorway, pale and undisturbed, with her quiet inquiry, "What is it, father?"

"John Milbank has got into trouble through thrashing Dennis Blake for uttering lies about *you*, Maggie. Mr Linch has called to know whether they *are* lies, in order that he may

adopt the proper line of defence. Please to answer any question he may put to you."

"Your father has imposed a very unpleasant duty upon me," observed the lawyer hesitatingly; "it is none of my seeking, of course. I merely came here as John Milbank's legal adviser, in order to get at the facts."

Maggie bowed like a princess, walked quickly up to her father, and, kissing him, forced him gently into a chair; for, notwithstanding his attempts at self-control, he was trembling excessively; and then stood up with her hand on his shoulders, confronting the visitor.

"Well, sir?"

"You have—ahem!—a pensioner, I believe, in Poulter's Alley," he began—"a young woman?"

"Not now," replied she, with quiet sadness: "the person you speak of is dead."

"Indeed! I saw her myself not an hour ago."

"You are mistaken. However, there was a poor girl there, to whom I gave assistance—as much as I could, though much less than I would fain have given."

"There is a child—an infant—out at nurse there: is it true that you support it?"

"I do so."

Maggie felt her father shiver beneath her touch, and sliding down her hand till it met with his, clasped it assuringly.

"My daughter is always good to the poor," said he, "though we are poor ourselves."

"And who is the father of this child?" inquired the lawyer, looking at his fingers, and dropping his voice to almost a whisper.

"Must I tell that?" asked Maggie, in the same hushed tone.

"It will have to be told to-morrow, and if I am unacquainted with the fact, my client will be placed at a disadvantage," was the rejoinder.

There was a long pause ; and Maggie's lips moved twice in vain before they could shape her answer : " It is Richard Milbank." Then she burst into tears.

" It is mere cruelty to your daughter, Thorne, to continue this investigation," said the lawyer, himself greatly moved ; " we must make the best fight of it we can for John ; that's all."

" Maggie ! darling Maggie ! he does not know you as I know you ; he has not your hand in his as I have, bidding me trust on through all. You must bear one question more, and answer it. You may ask it, Linch, without fear. Nay, if you will *not*, I will. Richard Milbank is the father of this child, you say, Maggie ; now, tell us one thing more—who was its mother ?"

" It was Alice Grey of Dardham. She ought to have been Richard's wife. May Heaven forgive him for his wrong to her ! She died some weeks ago—I fear, in want—I was too late to help her ; only just in time to save the child."

" And this can be corroborated by proof ?" exclaimed the lawyer excitedly.

" If necessary—if absolutely necessary to John. But oh, spare Richard !"

" My dear Miss Maggie, we will admit nothing unless we are absolutely obliged. After what you have told me, I should think this Blake would be only too glad to compromise the affair. However, though he spoke in malice, it was probably in ignorance of the facts of the case, and he has certainly been most terribly knocked about. We shall have to pay the man a good lump sum, no doubt. It is very hard upon our friend John," continued Mr Linch, addressing himself to the engraver, " to suffer thus in pocket for his brother, having just paid off his debts. I settled the last one for him yesterday. I never knew a man with so fine a sense of duty. Well, I go away with a light heart, Thorne, upon all accounts. Miss Margaret, I wish you good-day."

His friendly and effusive manner had quite returned. Maggie suffered him to take her hand, which most young women who had been subjected to such an injurious suspicion would probably not have done ; but her nature was eminently a just one. She perceived that the circumstances of the case had afforded Mr Linch no other alternative than to believe the child in Poulter's Alley was her own. Was it possible, thought she, with a shudder, that John Milbank also believed it, notwithstanding that he had resented the accusation in another's mouth ? What a good brother, as Mr Linch had said, had he proved himself, and how unostentatiously had he performed his good deeds, for not a word had he dropped to them about settling Richard's debts !

The consciousness of having grudged him praise, and the sense of his late kindness to her father in the matter of the loan—as well, perhaps, of this last action in her own behalf, though she tried to shut that out from her consideration—prompted her to speak of John as she had never done before. She said he seemed to her to be the most unselfish and unsullied of all men of their acquaintance.

The engraver smiled ; her choice of adjectives was particularly agreeable to him, since it appeared to be suggested by the contrast in the characters of the two brothers ; but taught by experience, he refrained from eulogy. John was always a good fellow, he admitted ; but why was he not more popular ? There must be something wrong, he feared, about one who was a favourite with such few people.

Maggie quoted from the book that she had been reading to her father before the lawyer had looked in, the observation that the friendship of the world was not to a man's credit, but altogether the other way.

"In that case," returned the engraver, "John should be secure of heaven, since everything he does has a bad motive ascribed to it by his fellow-creatures. The very paying-off his



brother's debts will be considered but a tardy act of justice—nay, of reparation—though, to my knowledge, the poor fellow has been sadly straitened for money to carry on his business.”

“Of reparation! How of reparation?” inquired Maggie.

“Oh! they say he made money by Richard, instead, as was really the case, of having been half-ruined by him! His very disappearance, even, has been laid to John's account.”

“What *do* you mean, father?”

“Nay, I don't mean to say they think he murdered him; but the world says—or did, before I was taken ill—that he bought him out of the concern at a cheap rate, and so secured it for himself.”

“Then the Hilton world must be a very, very wicked and slanderous one!” said Maggie indignantly.

The engraver shrugged his shoulders. “I think it is the air, my dear. I have known somebody in Hilton—and not, in my judgment, a wicked person—who had at one time never a good word to say for this John Milbank herself.”

To this, Maggie answered nothing; but after awhile, during which she gazed fixedly at the book before her without reading a line, she observed: “If you knew John was straitened for money, was it not wrong, father, to let him lend us so large a sum the other day?”

“I did not know it *was* lent until afterwards,” returned the engraver, smiling. “It was lent to *you*, you know, my dear, not to *me*.”

“That was only, of course, because you were ill, and could not attend to such matters. Don't you think it would be better to return him, say, half of it at once, and pay him the remainder by instalments, as we can scrape it together?”

“Why not give him security for the whole, Maggie?” answered the old man slyly. Then perceiving that he was not understood, he added: “Is it possible, my good lass, that you did not guess by what means we have won through this

terrible trouble! You know, of course, that it was thanks to John; but are you so blind as not to see why John has helped us? It is my belief that he has loved you from a boy; only, because Richard was too quick for him with you, that he never spoke of it."

"Oh, father, father!" cried Maggie, hiding the crimson of her cheeks in both her hands, "I hope not, I hope not!"

"That's hoping against hope, lass, for it is the case. But there is no need to take on so; I have quite done with giving you advice as to marriage, and if I know John, he is not one to intrude his attentions where they are not wanted. He is too used to holding his tongue, poor fellow, to plague you in that way. While Richard was paying you attentions, John could scarcely have done you a service lest it should have been misunderstood; but now the coast is clear, he has ventured upon a kindness. But as to speaking to you of marrying him, unless you give him some encouragement, that he will never do: such, at least, is my view of the matter, and though my limbs are lamed, I have still some use of my eyes."

The sorrowful glance that the engraver cast on his nerveless right hand went more perhaps to Maggie's heart than all his words. "I am very sorry, father, for your sake," sighed she, "that I cannot love John Milbank. I honour and respect him above all men, and feel more grateful to him than I can express, both on your account and my own."

"May I tell him that, Maggie?"

"Yes, father; it is but right that he should know it."

"My darling, you are curing me fast; where honour and respect are won, love is not altogether out of reach."

"My love is dead, father," sighed she, "and no miracle can ever quicken it."

"But if John would be content with the respect and honour, lass, and take you on those terms?"

"It is not necessary to speak of that, father: when John



asks me to become his wife—if he be really so ill-judged as to desire it—it will be time enough to consider that matter.”

“Very good, Maggie ; we will say no more about it,” said her father softly. He was secretly well pleased with the measure of success that had been vouchsafed to him.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS LINCH.

THE fracas, as the Hilton newspapers termed it, between John Milbank and Dennis Blake was settled out of court, as Mr Linch had foretold it would be ; but that did not curb the gossips' tongues, which made very free with Maggie's name. She formed for some days the chief topic of conversation at the *Sans Souci* club, not only in the card and billiard rooms, but, I am sorry to say, among the more grave and reverend seigniors, who discussed the circumstances of the case "with a world of coughing and noise," engendered mostly by suppressed significance. The theories on the matter were very various—some even contending that Blake was Maggie's champion against the aspersions of Milbank ; but almost all opinions were unfavourable to John. A man who could brick up a cellar with good wine in it, neither drinking it himself, nor permitting others to drink it, was not likely to receive much quarter in genial male society. Nor did he fare much better with the ladies ; their keener instinct directed them nearer to the truth, but they did not spare him the more on that account ; and, of course, they were capable of "saying things" from which the masculine mind shrank appalled. Of all this, Herbert Thorne and his daughter knew nothing for many days ; his condition kept him within doors, and Maggie stayed at home to nurse him. They had read the account of the *rencontre* with Dennis in the paper, and after-

wards that the matter had been compromised ; but they had heard nothing more, and they could not understand why John did not look in as usual.

The engraver endeavoured to explain it on the grounds of delicacy : this unfortunate quarrel had arisen on Maggie's behalf, and John might well conceive that his appearance would be painful to her ; perhaps he even blamed himself for his part in it, though the printed accounts showed he had acted under great provocation. Blake, drunk and dangerous, had insulted him in the street, and being mildly put aside by that quite resolute arm of his, had spoken daggers about Poulter's Alley, whereupon John had knocked him down, just once—and it must be confessed that the once had been enough. Denny had fallen to pieces beneath that "shot from the shoulder" like a box of matches ; it seemed as though John had been husbanding his strength throughout his inoffensive lifetime to deal that terrible blow.

It was a shocking catastrophe, no doubt, but Maggie secretly admired John for his part in it more than she had done for all his passive virtues, and this she would have done even had the girl he had thus championed been dead Alice Grey. It being herself, she experienced also a shock of tender gratitude. Certainly, as even her father said, it would be embarrassing for her to meet John ; but she longed to thank him for his advocacy—though she blamed its haste and violence—and, since she must see him sooner or later, it seemed foolish in him, though quite in accordance with his shy, retiring ways, to keep aloof. As days, however, went on, and weeks, without his coming, she began to speculate whether he would come at all ; and also to consider whether the mere fear of her displeasure was not the cause of his absence ; and though her father forbore to discuss the matter with her, she saw, by the failure of his spirits, that he missed John's visits exceedingly, and, like herself, had begun to conclude that

there would be no renewal of them. The improvement in his physical health was become much less marked, though his enforced idleness was borne with his usual patience. One afternoon there was a ring at the door-bell which startled them both, since visitors of any sort were very rare with them now.

"Thank Heaven, there is John at last!" cried the engraver.

Maggie did not reply, for she could not be so sure of John's ring as she had been of Richard's; and besides, now that the moment had come for the interview so long delayed, she half wished that it might yet be postponed: her pale cheeks flushed and her heart beat high as she listened for that slow, firm footfall on the stairs, which had in itself something of the owner's character. Poor Richard used to bound up them three steps at a time.

It was, therefore, with almost a sense of relief that she heard a female voice in conference with the servant below, and her father exclaim peevishly: "Why, it is that stupid, tedious woman, Martha Linch, after all."

Martha Linch *was* a stupid tedious woman, with a perennial flow of small-talk, that would have worn away the heart of any husband, though it were made of stone; but the maxim that there is "not stuff enough in a fool to make a good man," does not somehow apply to women. Miss Linch was an eminently good creature, and would have made the lawyer's home a happy one had he only been deaf; as it was, he was away from it a good deal: on week-days working at the law; on Sunday preaching the gospel—being, as Mr Roberts said, "a professing Christian, but a practising attorney;" and not being Martha's husband, he passed the hours of the night in silence, which recruited him. It was only her tongue—at once a speaker and an "unruly member"—that was in fault with her: her hand was ever ready to help her fellow-creatures, to smooth the pillow, and soothe the pain of the humblest. When the engraver had been taken ill, she had volunteered

to assist Maggie in tending him, an offer which was declined with thanks, though with decision ; but the rejection had not offended her. Nothing offended Martha Linch, except wickedness and vice, and such things as offend Heaven. But she never intruded where she was not welcome, and she knew that the engraver did not enjoy her society, so her visits in Mitchell Street were like those of angels. Once in six months or so this "old belle with her clapper," as coarse Matthew Thurle had been wont to term her, was wont to call on the Thornes, and the present was one of her state visits.

Upon this occasion, the clapper seemed to be somewhat "muffled," nor had her words and manners the bird-like vivacity for which they were generally distinguished, as she flew from twig to twig of small talk with untiring wing. Perhaps the melancholy condition of the engraver restrained her ; she saw at once that he was not yet able to be at work again, and her kind eyes glistened as they fell upon his disused tools. After a few words of genuine condolence with him, she addressed herself confidentially to Maggie.

"He is better though, is he not, dear ?" whispered she ; "only, while the grass is growing the steed starves, and it is so sad to be out of work. My dear brother has told me you seemed getting on quite comfortably, or else I should have called, of course ; you would have sent to me, if you had wanted any help, I hope. Well, that shows the advantage of putting by against a rainy day. I am sure it does you both credit, to have managed to rub on, and hold your heads up, without borrowing. That is most satisfactory ; after all, though, between friends, what is a little money advanced ? Obligation, indeed ! That's rubbish !"

Maggie was growing very hot and uncomfortable under these well-meant phrases, every one of which had a barb for her ; when her father came to the rescue, by inquiring after John Milbank. Miss Linch immediately assumed an air of

gloomy reserve, ill-fitting as a Spanish cloak thrown over a Highlander. "He is tolerably well, I believe," said she significantly; "as well as can be expected, quite."

"My good woman, what *do* you mean?" inquired the engraver, always impatient of poor Martha. "That is a phrase I have never before heard applied to a person of the male sex."

"Well, he's worried and troubled, of course. It was most injudicious of him to do what he did; and you never can stop people's tongues by knocking them down ever so often in the street—quite the contrary. My dear brother compares him to Cadmus, a gentleman about whom you probably know more than I. Every tooth that he knocked out of Mr Blake has sprung up an armed man against him."

"I understand the metaphor," observed the engraver dryly; "but what I can *not* understand is, how a man like John Milbank can be put out of sorts by malicious tittle-tattle. Why should he shut himself up like a hermit because fools speak ill of him?"

"He was never much of a man for going out into society," suggested Miss Linch; "and I believe he goes down to the office, and so on, much as usual."

"He seems to have quite deserted his old friends, however," remarked the engraver with irritation; "and you may tell him that I said so, if you please."

"O father!" interposed Maggie pleadingly.

"Well, really, you see it is such a very delicate matter. It is nobody's fault except the scandal-mongers', I know; but I don't quite see how John is to come here as usual; not on his own account, of course, Mr Thorne—in a man's case, nothing signifies—but out of delicacy to somebody else;" and Miss Linch looked significantly at Maggie.

"What! because a drunken reprobate tells a vile story of an honest girl—a story, too, that turns out on investigation



vastly to her credit—she is supposed, forsooth, to be unable to endure the sight of the man that has taken up the cudgels for her! Why, if he has any sense, he must be sure that a girl of spirit”——

“I entreat you to be silent, father!” exclaimed Maggie earnestly. “You are distressing me beyond all measure. It is plain enough that Miss Linch is aware of some other reason—and probably a good one—why John Milbank does not visit us. It seems to me that you would be greatly wanting in self-respect to send him any such message as you proposed a while ago.”

“Well, indeed, Mr Thorne, I couldn’t take it,” observed Miss Linch demurely. “I don’t think it would be consistent with propriety to do so; I don’t, indeed. It could only add to his unhappiness, and a more unhappy man than John, even as it is, I do not know. If I were wicked enough to believe in luck, I should say he was born without it. First to be half-ruined by his brother, and then to be blamed because his brother ran away; though nobody, I’m sure, laments his absence—his loss, one might almost call it, since I suppose he will never turn up again—more than John himself does. The difference in him, even then, as you must have seen with your own eyes, was sad enough: not a smile for anybody, and the colour all gone out of his cheeks, as from a cheap print in the wash; and now, because he has taken upon himself to chastise a wicked scoundrel for speaking ill of his brother’s betrothed wife—though I am sure I am as glad *that* never came off, as any of her friends—to be accused of wanting to curry favour with her upon his own account; I say he seems to me to be very hardly used indeed. Of course, it is an additional misfortune to be deprived of the society of such old friends as you and Maggie; but still, under the circumstances, how *can* he come? I think you must see that, Mr Thorne, yourself?”

"I do see it," answered the engraver gravely. "The fact is, Miss Linch, that Maggie and I have lived of late in such seclusion that we have not heard this gossip."

"Dear me, I hope I have not been inconsiderate!" exclaimed Miss Linch in a flutter. "I am the last person in the world to talk, myself, but I really thought that everybody was aware of what was said of John. It is perfectly shameful, in my opinion, and when the poor fellow is already half broken-hearted, and worn to a thread, for Richard's sake. I am sure such a man has need to have his reward in the next world.—Of course it is not your fault, Miss Maggie, so you needn't take on about it" (Miss Maggie's "taking on" was simply being perfectly silent, in Miss Linch's eyes, however, a circumstance of much significance), "for, as I always say, not a syllable of encouragement has John Milbank, to my knowledge, ever had from *you*. It was only yesterday that I tried to comfort him, when he called at my dear brother's, with saying that. 'Whatever the world may say, John,' said I, 'her conscience is as clear as yours, in that matter; she would as soon have thought of marrying the Pope of Rome.' But he only groaned, in a miserable, hopeless sort of way, and went slowly out of the house, like one in a dream. Mrs Morden tells me that he's always like that, more or less; and it's her opinion—though it needn't go any farther—that John's brain is getting affected from sheer moping and solitude. His health is certainly breaking up. He has had the roses planted again that poor Richard cut down in his tantrums; but I doubt, myself, if he will ever live to see them blow. However, it is a great pleasure to me to find you getting better, Mr Thorne; and I hope you will soon be able to come with Maggie, and take a dish of tea with us. A little change of scene will do *her* good too. But I've been chatting here long enough, and you're still an invalid, I must remember, and ought not to be excited."

Then, in a torrent of farewells and promises to look in upon Maggie, and cheer her up, whenever she should feel the need of that stimulant, Martha Linch took her leave.

Father and daughter sat in silence for some minutes after her departure. The old man was dreadfully cast down. If what their visitor had said was true, as no doubt it was, there was indeed no hope of John Milbank's visiting Mitchell Street, far less of his making suit to Maggie. That he was really devoted to her the engraver had no doubt. With some men in the like case, such rumours would only have urged them to prosecute their addresses, and learn their fate at once ; but John was so diffident of himself, and so sensitive of the feelings of others, that it might well be, in his chivalrous carefulness for Maggie's reputation, that he might even die and make no sign that he had ever loved her. There was a lackadaisicalness and want of spirit in such a course of conduct, that at one time would have aroused Herbert Thorne's contempt ; but a broken man, enfeebled by disease, and burdened with debt, cannot call contempt to his assistance ; such a man has only anxiety for his ally—or, rather, for his unsought companion, and well for him when it is not exchanged for mortification and disappointment. It was so exchanged now in Thorne's case. He had hoped to live to see his only daughter married to a good and thriving man ; but that union was out of the question : the delicate and beautiful flower that seemed formed to adorn a home, was to be put to far other uses. If health and strength should continue to be denied him—and they seemed just now to be gone from him for ever—she was doomed to be his nurse, and drudge, and scanty bread-winner, till death should relieve her of a useless father ; and then she would be quite alone, without a friend ! He bent his head over the work that ever and anon he still took up, in hopes to find that the virtue that disease had stolen had returned to his right hand, and

for the first time there fell a tear on the shining metal, that turned to disregarded rust.

"Father, dear, I am going out," said Maggie presently; "I shall be a little longer away than usual."

"As you please, my darling—as you please," he murmured with averted face.

It was her habit at five o'clock to leave him to visit the child in Poulter's Alley, who had been the innocent cause of all this trouble. He had never objected to her doing so; it was a protest against that ruffian scandal, and besides, he knew that it gave her comfort, and that she sorely needed it: but to-day he grudged her absence on that errand. What a curse had this Richard Milbank been to him and his, and what a legacy of woe had he left behind him! It would be hard enough for Maggie to get bread for their own mouths, and yet, for the future, it seemed she must support this fellow's unacknowledged offspring!

How complacently do we talk of the condition of the poor; yet what a burden to them is that which lies upon us like a feather's weight; how what we set aside as a paltry consideration, not to be reckoned in our load of cares, bows them to the very earth, who have their cares besides!

When Maggie, however, left Mitchell Street that afternoon, it was not to Poulter's Alley that she turned her steps: she took a road she had not travelled for many a day—that which led to Rosebank.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I WILL, JOHN."

MAGGIE had not visited Rosebank since her father had been taken ill ; the last time she had done so, the bitter knowledge of her lover's faithlessness had been thrust upon her, and all her scheme of life been shattered at a blow. But at that time there had been a hope of Richard's return to Hilton. She had gone to his house, though she did not enter it, to ask as usual for news of him. It had not been certain, as it was now, that he was either dead, or had forsaken her. A few months only had since passed over her head, but the change they had wrought in her was such as years of ordinary experience would have failed to effect. Her hair was glossy and plentiful and raven black as ever ; her form, though slighter than it had been, was still graceful and shapely ; but within, youth seemed to have fled from her altogether. She had heard with wonder on the previous Sunday, when she had gone to church for the first time for many weeks, the clergyman discourse upon the vanities of life, and of how men cling to them. He had used the old arguments she had heard a score of times before, and which had hitherto appeared to her sufficiently reasonable. "The pride of life" had dwelt in her once, no doubt ; she had taken pleasure in her own beauty, and delighted in the admiration which it had excited in another. Life had seemed pleasant enough and hard to leave. But now, for her, it was emptied of all its sweetness.

She put that question to herself which most men put (but not until they have attained to twice her age), and which few can answer satisfactorily to themselves : "What have I now to live for?" The man of self-denial and good deeds may reply : "I live for heaven." The man of pleasure may still hope to derive gratification from the old sources, though they are drawing near the dregs, and he is conscious that such joys are beginning to pall upon him ; but with the majority of those of middle age who sit and hear that trite description of the lures and attractions of life, it has lost all meaning. It is as though the preacher should take you to a theatre by daylight and expatiate upon the splendours of the transformation scene, and the beauty of the young persons who in the evening will be fairies. "It is no wonder," says he, "that you are dazzled by the magnificence of this spectacle, and intoxicated with the charms of these houris." But indeed we are not dazzled, and we are not intoxicated : we are sick of going to the play, and tired of the stage altogether—the whole weary stage of life. As to mere pleasure, it has lost its charm ; and as to work, we have by this time found out our measure. What we have done, indeed, we may do again, but probably not so well, and certainly not so much to our own satisfaction. There is nothing more to be hoped for that has not already been vouchsafed to us, unless our aspirations are very mean indeed. We may heap up money, we may mix in higher society than we do at present ; but if these are our hopes of happiness, we have travelled along life's road so long to little purpose indeed, or we must be of a disposition exceptionally sanguine. True, it is always well to work ; necessary to provide for our families ; and obviously wicked and cowardly to cut short the thread of our own existence ; but to hold up the picture of life's attractions to us is as idle as to exhibit the sign of some hotel where we have ourselves already sojourned, and drank all the best of the wine, and

eaten the pick of the meat, and where nothing is left, we *know*, but indifferent liquor and cold shoulders.

Maggie Thorne had attained to this knowledge twenty years before her time, but she had attained to it. There was her father to live for, and to work for; there was Richard's child to be supported; but as for any pleasurable expectation—far less the gracious gift we call *Hope*—to be looked forward to in the days to come, it existed for her nowhere. The "crown of sorrows" alone remained to her, of remembering happier days. There had been a time when the very sight of Rosebank had quickened her pulses, and brought the colour to her cheek; when the clang of its gate-bell had been music; when the scent of its flowers, as she passed through the garden, had filled her soul with ecstasy. She had wondered in her humility how everything that had then occurred to her there seemed to add to the great sum of her happiness.

She had come thither now upon an embarrassing errand, and yet she did not feel ill at ease; her misery had at least the advantage of making her indifferent and self-possessed. When the girl, in answer to her summons, informed her that John was not within, but was expected every moment, she did not, as when Martha Linch had appeared that day instead of him at home, feel any sense of relief or a reprieve. The associations of the place stirred her too much for that. Observing calmly that she would wait for Mr Milbank, she moved slowly towards the house, her eyes roving over each well-remembered spot. Here, beneath the southern wall, Richard, when a boy, had had a plot of garden of his own—very ill tilled—but in which grew a peach-tree, the fruit of which had always been reserved for her. In that gardener's house, where the tools were kept, and the wood was piled for winter use, she had hidden from him at "Hide-and-Seek." In that arbour they had sat together, while she had read to him, and

he had loved to listen, not to the words, but to the voice which spoke them !

All this had happened years ago, of course, yet it seemed but yesterday. There were later memories, dearer yet, from which she shrank. Here he had plucked a rose, and given it to her with words more sweet than its fragrance. The flower was dead—in a drawer of her desk at home—but not more dead to her than he who had given it. On this very spot, behind the angle of the house, he had turned to kiss her, while her father and the rest, after an evening spent with the brothers, had gone on towards the gate. Oh perjured lips, that were used to press another's cheek so fondly, to whisper into another's ear the self-same vows !

With quickened step, she moved on to the door, where Mrs Morden stood and welcomed her affectionately. This was a surprise, indeed, she said ; Maggie's pretty face, which had become quite strange to her, did her good to look at. It would do Mr John good, she was sure, and sore he needed it. What had come to him, for her part, she could not tell. "He takes no food to speak of ; and drink, as you know, Miss Maggie, he never did take. And it's the same with his sleep, for he sits up half the night, walking to and fro like a ghost ; and yet, in the morning, he is the first to be up and about."

"I noticed that he was looking far from well," said Maggie sympathisingly, "when he called last."

"Last !" echoed the old lady (whose deafness her visitor had for the moment forgotten), catching only the final word ; "why, of course it's impossible that he should last if he goes on like that ! It has been worse than ever with him during the last fortnight. I have sometimes made bold to advise him to go down and pass an evening with Mr Thorne and yourself, for not a soul ever comes to see him. There's a medium in all things, says I : your brother was given up to company ; but *you* may see your friends about you

occasionally, and no hurt. But he only shakes his head, and takes his book up—though *that* is as often upside down as not—for he has pleasure in nothing now. It all comes of his being so good a brother. But, as I tells him, I loved Master Richard better than anybody—present company excepted, my dear young lady, and, Heaven knows! I feel for you—but when a thing can't be helped, what's the use of fretting? If things are not to be as we wish them, they must be some other way. And now, *do* say a cheering word to him, if you can, Miss Maggie, for he seems to faint for it, like one of them rose-trees for a drop of rain. And I'll go and get ready a dish of tea for both of you, over which you may be more neighbourly-like and natural: there's nothing like tea to foster pleasant talk."

It was a great relief to Maggie when the garrulous old woman left her alone in the little parlour, full though it was of melancholy associations, for when the heart is sad, solitude is preferable to any sympathy which is not exactly tuned to the same chord of woe. In that very room, while his uncle was still on tolerable terms with him, Richard had declared his love, on just such a spring evening as the present: the old man was above stairs; John, as now, had not yet returned from the office; one glass door was opened, and one closed; the time was exactly the same as she now read it to be on the same clock-face. So long as she lived, she would never forget that time and scene, with every circumstance that environed them. If the accessories had not been present still, she could have recalled them with the exactest minuteness; but scarcely anything was changed. Upon the mantle-shelf two bronze vases filled with Indian grasses, that had satisfied old Matthew Thurle's views of internal decoration, notwithstanding that a thousand roses bloomed about his door; on the walls hung a faithful picture of the factory in which he had passed his busiest and happiest days; and opposite, was



a drawing of the little establishment, half-shop, half-shed, which had been all he owned in early days. It had been his practice to contrast one with the other, and boast to every visitor, in his frank, unvarnished way, of the small beginnings of his greatness. On the walls, too, hung the portraits of his nephews, at the period when they had been admitted to the high distinction of taking part in the business of the firm, each a mere boy, whose school-days had been cut short for that very purpose. How very, very beautiful was that bright face which even the cheap limner could not spoil! How round his brow clustered the soft brown curls, which she had played with many and many a time, and one of which—long afterwards—he had given her to mingle with her own, in sign——

With a sharp pain, she turned her eyes from that fair sight, and fixed them on the portrait of his brother. That was fair too; a man would have said, more fair; more earnest and more honest, and not less comely. There was not so much sparkle in the eye; no winning smile played on the lip; no arch expression, such as proclaims the boy of spirit, shone from the canvas. Yet there was something better than mere resolve and plodding in that thoughtful face; if it lacked assurance, it had confidence enough; in the eyes dwelt truth, and the courage to speak it. The hair was long and wavy, but without curl, which gave a somewhat effeminate air to the whole countenance; yet such a look, thought Maggie, wore Michael the Archangel when he forbore to smite, and left the Enemy of Mankind to be dealt with by a Greater than he. But this man had not forbore to smite when she was railed at; and she had come to thank him for it—partly to thank him, and partly to ask him to renew his visits to her father, notwithstanding that evil tongues might falsely impute to them a hateful motive. She had come of her own free will, though doubtless moved thereto by the spec-

tacle of her father's melancholy, and because she thought she owed it to John for his many kindnesses. He had been the best of brothers, as Mrs Morden had truly said, and he had also been the best of friends. The promise which this pictured likeness of the boy held out of "thoroughness" had been more than realised. It was not a flattering picture, from what she remembered of him—and yet it was for the first time that she now felt alive to that great strength, that patient endurance of wrong, that steadfast calm (she now knew to be but the mask beneath which good deeds were done) which shone from every feature.

"Ten years have changed all that, Maggie," said a quiet voice, and by her side stood the original of the portrait, smiling sadly down upon her.

"Why, John, how you frightened me!" cried she. She spoke the truth, for so deep had she been in thought that she had heard no sign of his approach, and was really startled by it; but her alarm was far greater now, when the suddenness of the shock had passed away, and she had time to scan his face. She had been prepared, from what the housekeeper had said, to see alteration in it, but not for what she saw. His large blue eyes looked forth from two dark caverns; his cheeks had fallen in; his chin was sharpened as her father's had been when the doctor looked most grave; the delicate complexion alone remained, which had been the subject of jest from his boyhood, and was intensified. He looked more "angelic"—as some had called him, not without reason—than she had ever seen him, and nearer to death and heaven. "What is the matter, John?" asked she, with tender earnestness. She was very sorry to see him thus. If he were to die, it struck her, for the first time, that with her sorrow would mingle a sharp sense of ingratitude, of unacknowledgment, not of favours, but of devotion. He was looking at her now, not as Richard had done, yet with a yearning that,

knowing what she did from her father's lips, she could not mistake ; with desire—but the desire of the unattainable : “ of the moth for the star ; of the night for the morrow ; ” with the reverence of the worshipper for his patron saint.

“ Nothing is the matter, Maggie, thank you.”

“ But you look so ill, John—so very, very ill.”

“ I am well enough,” he said. The tone was that in which the sick man who knows better than the doctor says : “ As well as I ever shall be.”

“ You cannot be well, John, else you would have come and seen us, surely, all this time. We—that is, my father has been sorely grieved about it.”

“ He sent you here, then, did he ? ” asked John slowly, the smile fading from his lip, and leaving his face as white and colourless as a lamp from which the light has faded away.

“ No ; I came hither unknown to him, to ask after you, and—and, also, John, to thank you for very much. For having got into trouble on my account, for one thing.” Her cheek was scarlet, but she held her head up, and looked earnestly upon him ; while he, on the other hand, looked down distressed. “ It is a very painful thing for me to speak of, and for you to listen to, John, but I must thank my champion. Let others blame you for your haste and anger. I take this hand that struck a scoundrel down, for flinging shame upon an honest girl, and kiss it.”

It was perhaps a generous impulse that prompted her, or perhaps she found it easier to do anything rather than speak upon such a subject ; but the action—though she did but raise his fingers to her lips, and then dismiss them—affected him strangely. His wan cheeks flushed for an instant, and his eyes kindled with excitement ; then his face grew blank again.

“ O Maggie ! ” cried he, as though in pain, “ that is great payment for small service.”

"The service was great, John," answered she gravely, "and will never be forgotten. And there are other things for which I have to thank you, too: the loan to my father, and—and this bracelet."

She drew from her bosom a little jewel-case, and laid it on the table.

"It was among the rest of the debts," said he slowly. "I thought the jeweller ought to be paid, since he complained of its being thrown upon his hands."

"You are always just and kind, John; but this does not belong to me, nor can I accept it. It was never Richard's to give; and if it had been—I mean, if it were now"—her voice grew faint and low, and her words incoherent—"that is all over and gone for ever!"

He did not speak, nor even look at her, but stood silent, waiting for her to recover herself, and playing nervously on the table with his hand.

"I meant to give it you back," resumed she presently, "knowing well from whom it came, and why; but you did not give me the opportunity. It seemed to me that you never intended to come and see us again; that you would content yourself for the future with doing us good, by stealth if possible, and that we should be friends—in any true sense—no more. That is hard on us, John."

"Hard on you!" repeated the other, with a hollow laugh. "*I hard on you!*"

"Yes; hard on me and very hard on my father. He wants a friend, and not only an almoner. I do not ask you why you never visit us now, because I know the reason. I was told to-day, for the first time, what people are saying about—about you and me."

"She knows it!" murmured John, with inexpressible melancholy. "I felt she did."

"Yes, I know it. But I don't know why you should

despise the slanders that are uttered against others, and yet take those to heart which concern yourself."

"They are not slanders, Maggie!" cried he desperately. "What they say is true."

"True!" echoed she indignantly. "What! that you rejoiced in Richard's departure, because it left 'the coast clear,'—that is the term they use—and freed you from a rival? If you were to tell me that you were so base as that, with your own lips, I would not credit it. No, John; if I know your heart, you would give half you have—half Richard's waste has left you—to see him once more alive and well here."

"I would give all, God knows," was the solemn answer.

"I knew it! And when they say that you are kind to us, nay kind to *him*"—here she pointed to the bracelet—"and have stripped yourself of means to clear his memory from shame, and all in hopes to supplant him with her who was once betrothed to him, I know that is false too."

"To 'supplant' him, and 'in hopes,'" answered John, looking quickly up at her for the first time, and speaking with intense excitement. "Yes; *that* is false. I have loved you, Maggie, all my life; I could not help it; I shall love you till I die!—Nay, since you have made me speak, you must hear me out. I say, when once Richard had won you, I tried to think of you but as my sister. I did my best to make you so. It was in my power to have hindered Richard's marriage, from lack of means, and I enriched him. I look back upon the past—*that* past, at least—and find nothing to reproach myself with—nothing! It is a lie to say that I ever strove to supplant him: and even after he left Hilton, you can witness for me that I never spoke one word to you of more than kindness. 'Hopes!' Heaven knows I never had a hope, until this day, this hour! You said just now, that if—if he were still alive"—

"Still alive!" echoed Maggie trembling excessively. "What makes you think him dead?"

"I thought *you* thought him so, because you said: 'That is all over and gone for ever.' It seemed to me that you would never have given him up, whatever happened."

"You were wrong, John. If he returned to-morrow, we should be strangers. There are some things a woman can forgive, but never forget. I could not be his friend even. Richard and I have shaken hands for the last time."

"Then let me speak to you of *my* love, Maggie!" exclaimed the young man passionately. "I do not supplant him now. I would never have wronged him, but for those words of yours, even by so much as to say 'Pity me.' I should have died, and you would never have known. I had made up my mind to that, and now you have only to say 'No,' and you shall never hear me speak of love again.—Supplant him!" here he drew himself up as though replying to some imaginary accuser. "Neither present nor absent, neither living nor dead, has he been supplanted! You yourself tell me your heart is vacant, Maggie; oh! has it not a little, little space for me?"

He could plead for himself, this man, it seemed, after all; nothing could exceed the pathos and earnestness of his tones, and yet his manner, though eager, was forced, and that confidence was altogether lacking which makes half the eloquence of a lover's prayer.

Maggie looked at him, not coldly, indeed, for her face was full of tender pity, but with infinite regret.

"It wounds me to the quick, John, to give you the answer which I yet perceive you to expect. My love is lost with Richard, or buried with him. I have it not to give even to you whom I respect and admire above all men. My heart is not vacant, as you term it, but withered. It has loved once, whether worthily or unworthily it matters not, and can



never love again, any more than a dead tree can put forth leaves."

"You mistake me, Maggie," answered John, with a calm that bespoke the depth of the passion beneath it: "I am not so hopeful as you imagine. Since I have borne so long to see you love another, I can bear to see you without love at all. I can bear to marry you so, Maggie, and be thankful. Listen a moment before you say 'No' again, for it will be the last word you will ever speak to me. God forbid that I should threaten you!—it is no threat at all. I shall live for months, for years, perhaps, but not here. This lonely place, the very town itself, has become intolerable to me, and I shall leave it. You may be sure that your father shall not have cause to miss me, at least in a material way. I am not bidding for you, Maggie. What is mine will be yours, whether *you* consent to be mine or not. I have no other object to live for but your comfort—I never had."

"O John, John!" cried Maggie; "if I had all to offer you that a good man has a right to expect in her he weds, I should not be worthy of you; but as it is, how can I"——

"Worthy of me!" interrupted he, with bitterness. "Don't talk like that, Maggie. You don't know what you are talking *about*. I am worthy of no woman's love, far less of yours. I"—— Here he stopped suddenly, and leaning on the table, rocked himself from side to side. His agitation was terrible to witness, and smote Maggie to the heart.

"I should say, John, that that was mock humility, if one of the best of men had not once called himself 'the chief of sinners,'" said she. "I know you are no hypocrite; you would never play a false part, though it were to gain the world."

"I don't know about 'the world,' Maggie; but I think I would do anything, fair or foul, to possess you. Please to give me my answer, for every moment that I look at you, and



hear your voice, will make my doom the harder. Dear girl, be merciful!" cried he, with piteous passion. "You touched my hand just now with your sweet lips—why, that was more to me than warmest kiss from her he loved would have been to another man! I do not look for love, though love will come. It must, it must! Give me the chance to win it! Or, even if that be hopeless, call me yours, and let me call you mine! O Maggie, will you be my wife?"

"I will, John!"

They were plain, passionless words enough, and though a smile went with them, it was the smile that gilds the favour granted to importunity, rather than that which should accompany a maiden's "Yes." But the effect on John was electrical. His face lit up with joy; his very limbs, which, as though weighed down by despondency and lack of hope, had hung loose and listless, seemed suddenly to acquire strength and vigour; for a single instant, all his lost youth and beauty seemed to revisit him, as he seized Maggie's hand and covered it with kisses. She had crowned his wretched life with those un hoped-for words, as King Cophetua crowned the beggar maid; and his love was still very humble.

Poor Maggie was thankful that it was so; but she could not help contrasting her new lover's modest triumph in his success with Richard's raptures on a like occasion. The recollection gave her a momentary pang; but she did not repent of having yielded to John's appeal. By so doing she had secured the happiness of the two beings whom she revered most in the world, John Milbank and her father; and it has been said that our own happiness is always found in seeking that of other people. There was one thing only that troubled her—a very foolish trouble, since it was certain that the matter would be arranged according to her own wishes; but she regretted that she had not made a stipulation that she should be permitted to adopt the child in Poulter's Alley. She could

hardly make it now, far less give her reasons for desiring it ; which were, that when married to John she might have something to love—in Richard's son.

The successful wooer must have had his trouble too, for long after Maggie had departed from Rosebank—her promise given that she would become its mistress in a few weeks—he paced the little parlour with restless tread ; at supper-time the untasted food remained upon his fork, while he sat back in his chair, and, wrapt in thought, stared blankly at the wall ; and once, but this was far into the night, he threw himself upon his knees, and clasped his hands, but the next moment, with a pitiful despairing cry, rose up again, to pace the room once more till morning came.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARRIED.

PERHAPS the greatest social advantage which Londoners possess over provincials is, that, if they please, they can avoid gossip. Tale-bearing and tittle-tattle, if not absolutely unknown in the metropolis, only exist as some tropical plants may grow amongst us, dwarfed and stunted, with no power to range; whereas in our smaller towns they attain gigantic proportions and a luxuriant vegetation. Even in the heart of the country the chief talk is about individuals—the parson's tendency to drink, the squire's meanness, the parish doctor's abominable profligacy. But in the country town it is scarcely too much to say that there is no other talk. In our "centres of industry," such as Hilton, there are several circles of society, which (unlike those of Euclid) cut, but do not touch one another, so that each scandal revolves in its own orbit. If John Milbank had been in a lower grade, or Maggie in a higher, their affairs would now have been discussed only in one circle, that of the second-class manufacturers, or of the skilled mechanics; but as it was, they were very freely canvassed in both. Moreover, Richard's connection with the *Sans Souci* club brought these young people under the notice of a still higher section of society. Nay, the very lowest strata of the population were also linked with their fortunes through the medium of the child (William Grey it had been christened) in Poulter's Alley, whose nurse had her own visit-



ing-list, we may be sure, though she had no particular day for receptions ; so that the news of their engagement might almost be termed the topic of the town. It was received with great disfavour by all parties. The women of his own class were furious that John Milbank should "let himself down" to marry a girl who was little better than a mill "hand." They had been informed by their fathers and brothers what a head for business he had, and how certain he was to succeed in it, and become a rich man ; and they had never quite given up the hope of his eventually getting "civilised"—or, in other words, of his choosing a wife from among his equals. It had been all very well for Richard, who was going to the dogs, and sure to drop out of "society," at all events, to have cast his wayward affections on such an object ; but in John's case it was simply disgraceful. This "young person," if common report was to be believed, was not even respectable ; for what was that horrid story about a baby in Poulter's Alley, and Mr Dennis Blake ? It was enough to bring old Matthew Thurle from the grave to see his model nephew behaving in such a fashion. However, model or not, Mr Milbank's tastes had been always low. His brother *had* made an effort to get into better society, though the result might not have been very successful ; whereas John had made none. There were other ways of being lost besides squandering your money away on cards or horses. And "mark their words"—this was the finale of all discussions upon the subject—"nothing good would come of it : " an unequal marriage flies in the face of Providence, and, sooner or later, is certain to bear its own punishment. Time would show. The women, contrary to custom in such cases, were not so irate with Maggie as with John ; and, of course, the anger of the men was concentrated upon the male sinner.

At the *Sans Souci* club, where Richard, since his absence, had become more popular, perhaps, than before, he and John

were now likened by Mr Roberts to Charles Surface and his brother. John was a hypocrite, a humbug: had been scheming to get the girl for himself all along, and had probably sent Richard out of the way for that very purpose. The man that had bricked up his cellar was not such a fool as they thought he was. If he had been a genuine teetotaler, he would, of course, have destroyed the wine, which was simply now becoming more valuable every day. He was not so much an ascetic, it seemed, as a miser. This pretty girl was not to be envied, nor, perhaps, even to be congratulated on having escaped her first lover. And *was* he her first lover, or had John himself been secretly the accepted swain all along? The child in Poulter's Alley might be a young Milbank, and yet not Richard's son—eh! And what a row there would be when Richard came back and found this alteration in the programme! Or had he been "squared" by John himself? It was a pity that fellow Dennis Blake had just had to leave the club—not, of course, on his own account, for it was a good riddance—but because he might have had some information to give upon this interesting topic. Upon the whole, what a queer affair it was, and yet not so queer as it might turn out to be when all came to be known!

Of all this talk, the two principal personages concerned were for the present profoundly ignorant. Maggie, though now and then sick at heart with thinking of the days that were no more, did not in the main repent of having promised her hand to John. She was well content to see her father mending and in such good heart, for, indeed, the news from Rosebank had had the effect upon him of a cordial upon a sinking man. He was too wise to overwhelm her with congratulations, far less with boastful allusions to what had been his own advice from the very first; but it was plain that he thought her the luckiest of girls, and blessed his stars the more, since the probability of such good fortune had seemed to him so

exceedingly small. Nor was it only prudence that prompted him to be thus silent. Love had taught him that it was chiefly for his own sake that Maggie had accepted John, and that, however his eyes might view it, it was in fact a self-sacrifice on her part; and though he felt that it must turn out to her advantage, he was not less grateful to her for what she had done. An opportunity presently occurred of showing that he too, for his daughter's sake, could accept an undesired position. It was significant of the condition of her state of feeling with respect to her future husband that Maggie spoke of him to her father quite unreservedly, even to the discussion of his character, about which however they were pretty well agreed.

"There is one thing, father," said she, "which I should like to see arranged before my marriage, and which, I fear, will trouble John—I mean about little Willie."

The engraver was not unprepared for this allusion to Richard's child; he thought she was about to propose that some provision should be made for the infant, which, indeed, it seemed only right should be done.

"I am sure, my dear, that John will do his duty by the poor boy, if it were but for Richard's sake, and even though you had not personally interested yourself in the matter."

"But I must have the child near me; be permitted to see him whenever I please. I promised his dying mother to take her place with it. Besides," added she, with sudden frankness, "it is all that belongs to Richard which I shall ever see."

"My dear Maggie, that is a strange thing even for me to hear you say; and I am sure it would have distressed John beyond measure. I hoped—I did most sincerely hope—that you had got over your misplaced affection, and that in making this wise choice"—

"Choice!" interrupted Maggie bitterly: "a woman

chooses but once, father, as she loves but once. If Richard were to return to-day, to-morrow"—

"Heaven forbid!" muttered the old man, "until at least my daughter is John's wife."

"It would make no difference, so far as this marriage is concerned; fear not for that; but I cannot, and I will not, leave his child to hireling hands. Do you think that John would very much object to have little Willie at Rosebank?"

"I think he would," answered the engraver gravely; "and especially if he guessed the reason for your wishing it. He would not perhaps oppose it, but the proposition would be most distasteful; and if ever you and your husband should fall out—as wives and husbands will do—it would rankle in his mind."

Maggie sighed, and one little foot moved hither and thither, tracing out the pattern on the carpet, as it had once traced Richard's name, when she was crossed before.

"Why should not *I* keep Willie?" said the engraver presently.

"*You*, father! What difference would that make, since you will live with us at Rosebank?"

This had been tacitly agreed upon by all three; John, indeed, had spoken of it to Maggie as an understood arrangement, and they had settled together the room which the old man was to occupy, as best adapted for his work; while he himself, though he had not absolutely closed with their offer, was secretly delighted with it: he would still be under the same roof as his dear Maggie; there was the garden—and he delighted in a garden, for which that little parterre on the leads was but a poor substitute—and he could now pursue his employment, and bear his share in the expenses of the household, the same as if at home. Now this bright dream was shattered, and he must do his best to appear as though he had never dreamed it.



"No, Maggie; a man should live in his own house as long as he can keep a roof over his head," said he decisively. "John is very kind in wishing me to make my home at Rosebank; but man and wife get on better together when left to themselves. A resident father-in-law"—here he forced a smile—"may not be so bad as a resident mother-in-law, but there are still objections to him; not from your side of the house, of course, my darling. No, no; I shall stay here at the old place; and when you are gone, there will be plenty of room in it for the child and his nurse, and then I shall be sure of your coming to see me every day, if it were only for Willie's sake."

He could not help that little touch of bitterness, and it did not mend matters that she took it in serious earnest, and not as the reproof for which it was intended.

"O father!" cried she, "do not say that. As if I could put little Willie, or—anybody in the world, before yourself? It would certainly get over every difficulty, if you would consent to take the child; and if you really are resolved not to live with us—though I had taken for granted that you would do so, and was so depending on it"—

She kissed him tenderly, by way of finish to the sentence, which, perhaps, she did not find it easy to conclude in words. In her secret heart she was glad—quite independent of the proposition with regard to the child—that her father had resolved to remain in Mitchell Street. When John was away she would then be quite alone, and able to indulge in her own thoughts: her sorrows, as she imagined, would not be such as would be lightened by sympathy, nor, if they had been, would she have found it in her father. Solitude, as she conceived, would be absolutely necessary for her to recruit her strength and jaded spirits, after the effort which the society of John would demand of them. This reflection occurred to her, not so much on her account, as on that of John himself, to whom

she felt all was due that she could pay. And also with respect to her father, it had already struck her what pain she would be giving the old man, if she should be unable to conceal from him that she was wretched in this marriage, upon which he had built such hopes, and which, he must be aware, she had contracted for his sake, and not her own. For a few hours every day she could wear a mask of cheerfulness; but dwelling under the same roof, and a constant witness of her behaviour, it would be impossible that he should be thus deceived.

It is certain, indeed, that, of the two, John Milbank regretted the engraver's refusal to live at Rosebank more than Maggie herself. He really liked the old man, and had thought, besides, that her father would have been a companion to his wife during the long hours in which he was engaged at the works; but perceiving, from her manner—of which he was a very keen and tender observer—that the arrangement suited her wishes as it stood, he made no attempt to alter it. As to the child, it was true he did not offer it a home at Rosebank, but he privately consulted with his future father-in-law as to whether he himself, as Richard's brother, should make provision for its maintenance, or whether, in his judgment, Maggie would prefer to do so as heretofore; and when Herbert Thorne replied, with a shrug of the shoulders, that it was Maggie's wish to support the child herself, John—affecting, like him, to treat the matter as a benevolent whim of hers, though the whole affair was as clear to him as it had been made to Thorne, and pained him to the quick—merely said: "Then we must increase the pin-money." And thereupon made so large an allowance to Maggie as would not only defray whatever expenses she might be put to on Willie's account, but would enable her, if need were—though the old man was now getting once more into work again at his own calling—to assist her father also. Indeed, if the young ladies of his own class had known "the figure" at which John

Milbank thus estimated the "outgoings" of his future wife, they would have repented having missed him, and grudged his bride her luck more bitterly than ever. But as for Maggie, without being ungracious, she seemed scarcely alive to her good fortune in this respect. "It seems a good deal, John, but you were always generous," was all the acknowledgment she made of his liberality. The fact was, that for the present she could not bring her mind to bear upon such details at all. The arrangements for her approaching marriage, the alterations and improvements suggested at Rosebank, had little or no interest for her, and had it not been for Martha Linch—who, though having failed in her own little scheme of matrimony, took the greatest delight in forwarding the marriages of others—it is probable that her wedding-day would have found her in a very unprepared and ordinary state, with respect even to wardrobe. Perhaps a trousseau purchased out of money borrowed from the man one is going to marry, lacks the charm of other trousseaux; and possibly with all her humility, Maggie felt within herself that no price could be too high that was purchasing her body and soul, notwithstanding that she had voluntarily consented to the bargain. Are wedding-gifts, and ample settlements, and liberal pin-money, often accepted in this thankless manner, I wonder; or is the notion of 'marrying for love' so out of date, that gifts are no longer valued for the sake of the giver, but by a more practical standard?

At all events, Maggie had all she wanted, in a material sense, and was envied above measure, accordingly, by all young persons of her own sex. It was evident that John was resolved to spoil her, and that is a process of deterioration which brides-elect are generally very willing to undergo. In one thing only did Maggie's engagement seem to be deficient—that blissful epoch called the honeymoon was to be spent by the happy pair at Rosebank, instead of, as usual, in

flitting from lake to lake among the northern hills, or in basking on the Undercliff in the Isle of Wight. Business was so pressing just now at Hilton, that John 'really did not feel himself justified,' he said—unless, indeed, Maggie should express a marked preference for any particular spot—in leaving home at present ; and as Maggie was quite indifferent to the matter of locality—for when one *is* to be sold, what does it signify whether it is at Christie's or Foster's ?—thus it was arranged. This departure from precedent was, perhaps, taken in worse part by society at large, as respected the bridegroom, than anything he had done before. 'It was all his meanness,' said the members of the *Sans Souci*, who, from the contrast which the reports of his prudence afforded to the lavishness of which they had been the spectators in his brother's case, did honestly believe that John was mean ; and even Martha Linch remarked that she thought Maggie would have had more spirit than to have consented to this stay-at-home arrangement of John Milbank's, since a honeymoon at one's husband's house was really no honeymoon at all.

CHAPTER XIX.

A FORBIDDEN SUBJECT.

It was remarked of Maggie, on the day of the wedding, that, notwithstanding her bridal attire and her beauty, she looked like a sober married woman already. It was not that she had what is termed a matronly air, but the sweet confusion that befits a bride was somehow wanting. There was a yearning in her face when it was turned towards her father, and a smile reflected in it, though somewhat sadly, his own well-pleased glance; but when she turned towards her husband her look was cold, though gracious. No expectancy of a bright future lit up her large dark eyes; no gentle tremors quicken the rise and fall of her fair bosom. She had once looked forward to her marriage-day with as proud thoughts and happy dreams as any other maiden well-beloved, but not to this one. At the very moment when she breathed the words that made her this man's for life, she thought of Richard; and when he placed the ring upon her finger, she remembered with a sharp pang the last time that a ring had there been placed, and by whose dear hand. She could not help these feelings, nor did she wrong her husband by them; they were born of associations that were too strong for her to ignore. If women are to be punished for their uninvited thoughts, Heaven help them!

The next day John was at his office, and Maggie walking alone in her garden at Rosebank. That spot had been especially dear to her, as we have said, and it was her duty to

efface its dearness, to accustom herself to it under other conditions. It had been changed by John, perhaps with some secret view to this : here was a new arbour, and here a flower-plot that had not been of yore. Before the windows of the little drawing-room a fountain played. In the tool-house she found hoe and rake and spade fit for her own small hands, and for no other's. Within the house were tokens everywhere of her husband's provident devotion. She had never dropped a wish—long forgotten by herself, and uttered in the childish days when one is given to wishing—for this or that, but that for which she wished was there awaiting her. Whomsoever *she* had preferred, she could not deny to her own heart that the man who preferred *her* above all women was he who had won her for his bride ; nor did she attempt to deny it. She was thankful for these things, not in themselves, but because each was an argument in her husband's favour, and strengthened her in her resolve to be worthy of his love. A little boudoir had been fitted up for her above the sitting-room, and looking out upon the garden, and up to which came, "like the voice and the instrument," the breath of the roses and the music of the fountain ; in it was a book-case, stored with volumes chosen by one who knew her taste better than she did herself. But what touched her most, and for which she gave her husband credit, was, that the room itself was what it was : a fairy transformation of "the turning-room" where John had kept his lathes, and into which she had scarce ever before set foot. It would have been far more convenient, she knew, to have made this bower out of the adjoining room—once Richard's—which was to have been her father's, in case he had come to dwell with them. It was very, very tender in John not to have fitted *that* one up for her. At present, at all events, she felt that she could never have sat in Richard's room, which, indeed, she avoided like a Bluebeard's chamber. Mrs Morden's talk about him

wounded her poor heart as though each word had been a knife. "Well, my dear, it is better as it is, I'm sure: and Mr John, whom I have known ever since he was so high, will make the Best of Husbands to you, as he was the best of brothers; but there was something about Master Richard as made everybody love him in spite of themselves. Here's his room, look you, just as he left it, or thereabouts—for I had not the heart to alter it, except scrubbing and such-like, though Mr John, he said: 'Let it be done up;' but he did not look after it himself like the rest of the house, and so I just let it be. I seem to smell the dear lad's smoke about it still—he was always a-smoking—but that, I reckon, is fancy, for smoke don't hang, leastways in chintzes, for half the time as he has left us. Would you please step in?"

But Maggie had not stepped in, only stood at the door to cast a glance around it—to be photographed upon her heart, and gazed at with inward eye for many a day—and then had continued her tour of inspection elsewhere. "The Best of Husbands." Yes; that simple term, applied to John by his old housekeeper, was the fittest that could be found. As time went on, all folks that knew them used it; and before the year was out, it found an echo even in Maggie herself. In one way, he was more like a lover in his first days of courtship than a husband, so reverential was he in his devotion to her; he treated her with a Sir Charles Grandison sort of courtesy, which was yet of quite another sort than mere exquisite politeness, being born of an intense admiration. The being he had lived for in vain for so many, many years had not disappointed him—far from it—but even yet she seemed to him something "too bright and good for human nature's daily food." If Maggie could be spoiled, she was a lost woman. Even in the matter where she had expected opposition, she found none. It happened that bad weather set in, to which any husband might have objected to his wife's exposing herself,

and yet she went every day without reproof to Mitchell Street, to see her father and little Willie. She had peremptorily refused the offer of a vehicle for that purpose, for she knew John was far from rich, and must have well nigh beggared himself to fill her home with all its luxuries; and one day, an especially inclement one, she had forborne to pay her usual visit. She did not tell him this, but he found it out without inquiry; he seemed to have an instinct which revealed all she did, or failed to do, or wished, or would avoid.

"Maggie, my darling, if you can't go up to see your father, we must bring him—him and little Willie" (it was the first time he had mentioned the child by name)—to see *you*."

She saw the effort that it cost him to make this simple speech, and came more nigh to loving him for having made it than she had ever done. But she was by this time as fully resolved that Willie should never come to Rosebank, as of old she had been desirous to have him. She did not wish "the low beginnings of content" with her new home and life to be trodden down by his little feet; nor to hear under that roof the prattle of a baby tongue that might remind her of a voice she would fain forget. The measured but tender accents of her husband were growing dear to her, though with another dearness than Richard's passionate tones had had; the continuous rain of his tenderness was finding its way through the mantle of indifference with which her first love's desertion had clothed her. She found herself replying with some heat to those who took John to task for this and that: for his habitual gravity, which even her awakening affection could not warm to geniality (he could be gracious as the sun, but never mirthful); and especially for his disinclination to leave home.

"Your husband wants shaking up, my dear," Martha Linch would sometimes observe, as if he were a bottle of colchicum, "and will mope himself to death unless you make him take a holiday. Why, he has never stirred from Rosebank, I do

believe, since his—— Well, I don't know how long," added Martha, flushing like a peony at the thought of how near she had been of talking of that catastrophe of Richard's disappearance.

"John is much better, thank you," would be Maggie's stiff reply, "than he has been for months." This was quite true; it seemed that in winning his wife he had won back all his health, and nearly all his wholesome, handsome looks. "As to taking a holiday, he is never so happy as when he is at his work, which, moreover, requires constant supervision."

"Oh, I am sure of that!" returned the old maid, not a little terrified by Maggie's tones, and anxious for conciliation: "everybody says that he is a host in himself in business matters; and then this beautiful place—quite a palace, I'm sure—must have cost him a mint of money, which, as I always say, ought to excuse him entertaining his friends at present—though, doubtless, that will come all in good time."

"If anybody complains that my husband is not hospitable, they are finding fault with me, and not with him. If I wished to ask half Hilton to dinner, he would let me do so; and as for leaving home, I, for my part, can fancy no prettier spot than Rosebank anywhere."

It was right in Maggie, and very characteristic of her, to take the blame—if blame there was—upon her own shoulders; but, as a matter of fact, though she had no more desire for "seeing company" than John had, nor wish to leave her home, she did think that a temporary change of scene, and absence from his office, might do John good. He shrank from society, and had a dislike to travel—even so much as to a trip to London—which was positively morbid. Whenever she had somewhat urged him to this effect, his answer had been a quiet, "We will go if you wish it, Maggie;" which for him was a very strong negation, since everything else that she

might be supposed to wish was done without her even mentioning the matter.

So far as the fact was known, public opinion at Hilton—represented chiefly by Maggie's contemporaries of her own sex, and by the coterie of veterans of the *Sans Souci* club, who interested themselves in the local scandal—resented Maggie's growing content with her position. It blamed her for not insisting upon the good wine at Rosebank being set free from its prison, and dispensed for the public good. Richard's hospitality had been, no doubt, too prodigal, but it was monstrous that John Milbank—whose business, untrammelled by his late spendthrift partner, was bidding fair to take rank with the best in the town—should ask nobody to dine but his own father-in-law and such third-rate folk as Mr Linch, the lawyer-preacher, and the old maid his sister. The wine for these entertainments, it was currently reported, John absolutely purchased in the town, rather than break into the repository which in a moment of passionate chagrin he had built up. Mr Roberts, remembering the flavour of that good old port which still remained there, mourned for it as for some fair nun, who, under a false accusation of frailty, had been bricked in by an ascetic prioress. The improvement in John's fortunes naturally made him enemies, and these did not scruple to revive the old slander, that he had himself found means to rid himself of the unfortunate Richard; he had taken advantage of his pecuniary necessities to buy him out of the factory, and when he had thus secured his absence, he had married his lady-love. It took a long time for these cruel and infamous reports to filter through the various strata of society that discussed them, and to reach Rosebank; but, in the end, Maggie—thanks to Mrs Morden, for whom she had, unhappily, purchased an ear-trumpet—came to hear them.

John's traducers would perhaps have held their tongues,

could they have foreseen the effect their slanders produced upon her. Instead of setting her against her husband, they made her his partisan; and when a woman takes up the cudgels for a man, the embracing of his cause generally ends in her embracing the man himself. Moreover, the very offence that was imputed to him, knowing it, as she did, to be utterly false and undeserved, was of advantage to his cause; it compelled her to reflect upon the subject which she had hitherto avoided as too painful to be dwelt upon, and, to her surprise, discovered that the wound which she had thought to be so tender had in the meantime somewhat healed. She could now think of Richard and John together, not, indeed, in the way of contrast—which, for Richard's sake, nothing would have induced her to do—but with a calm understanding of their relative positions to one another. She had at one time shut her ears to all that her father had urged against her former lover: how he was squeezing his generous brother dry, and sapping the credit of the house of old Matthew Thurle, of which they were the sole representatives; but the very existence of the present ill-feeling towards her husband showed that these things had been true. John had clearly had from the first the strongest reasons for avoiding partnership with his brother, since he could not but have foreseen—as every one, indeed, had done—what a millstone he would have been about his neck in the way of business; yet, so far from doing this, he had warned him of what would happen should he absent himself from his uncle's funeral, and thereby not only lost half the fortune that would have been all his own, but had endangered the remainder; and when the mischief was done, how patiently had he borne all the wrong that Richard had wrought him: the slights at home, the sneers abroad, and the heavy losses that had gone nigh to destroy the business in which he took such pride, and worked so hard to aggrandise. What, then, could be more

false and wicked than to accuse John of having schemed to oust his brother from the partnership! As to herself, she could bear witness how carefully he had avoided any word that might suggest to her that he was a rival with Richard for her hand, notwithstanding—as she now knew well—that he had adored her in secret all along, with a love so tender and yet so strong, as must be rare indeed with men, and which she took shame to herself that it was not in her power to return in kind.

To convince these slanderers by argument, she knew to be impossible; but might they not be silenced by some irresistible fact? Her dream was that, somehow or other, the brothers might be reconciled; that Richard, wherever he was, might be induced to give some sign that he was not at feud with John. It was most unreasonable of him that he should be so, except upon her own account; and even upon hers—neglected, forsaken, nay cruelly deserted as she had been by him (she put out of sight, though, alas, not out of mind, his faithlessness, for of *that* he might perhaps imagine her to be ignorant)—how could he affect to be a wronged or injured man? She had never feared his reproaches: even when standing at the altar, had Richard suddenly confronted her, she would have stood her ground, and denied all fealty to him. He had himself played the traitor, and broken bonds between them; but now, for her husband's sake, so strongly had his devotion worked with her, she wanted more than Richard's non-interference—it was her hope to secure his acquiescence in her marriage. Her eyes were opened, even more widely than she confessed to herself, to his true character; and she felt that it was possible to make it worth Richard's while to make some public avowal that John had not done him the wrong that rumour ascribed to him. In order to accomplish this it was necessary, in the first place, to consult John himself upon the matter; and this first step, though the least difficult, was the

most embarrassing to her of all ; for up to this moment, and she had been married now for more than a year, her husband and herself, as if by tacit consent, had avoided all reference to his lost brother. He had never mentioned Richard's name to her, nor she to him.

CHAPTER XX.

ONLY A CIGAR-CASE.

WHEN once Maggie had formed any resolution, from a sense of duty, and especially for another's sake, it was sure to be put in practice, no matter how painful might be the execution of it : but yet she found herself delaying her communication to her husband respecting Richard from day to day, on pretences (which she knew to be shallow) of a good opportunity for the discussion, of taking John when he was free from business cares, and even in the hope—such a mere shadow of expectation, that she could see through it, and all her fears behind it—that John himself would first speak upon the matter. If the base things which men were saying against him should chance to reach his own ears, for instance, would he not think it right to justify himself to her ? In reality, she knew that he would not do so, under any circumstances ; and one of her chief reasons for speaking to him was, that he should be spared the pain of hearing such reports at first hand, not broken to him, as she meant to break them, by the voice of tenderness and duty ; and yet she remained silent, and put off the evil hour. She had almost decided upon broaching the subject, one especial afternoon when John was to come home earlier than usual, by reason of a half-holiday at the factory : but a certain circumstance deferred it. Her father asked to have a bed for a few nights at Rosebank, by reason of some necessary repairs in his own house, which

would, for the time, leave no other living-room except the nursery—as little Willie's room was called—habitable. She would have been glad in any case to welcome the old man, but the delight she experienced at his visit could now only be set down, as she well knew, to its particular opportuneness: it would necessitate the adjournment of her project, and give her a reprieve. A weight seemed lifted from her mind at once, and she set about her little preparations to receive her father with an alacrity and cheerfulness that had been strangers to her for many a day.

The room that the guest was to occupy was Richard's room, which, indeed, was the only spare bed-chamber in the house; and for the first time since she had been mistress of Rosebank, she took a careful survey of it, to see that it was ready for his reception. It surprised herself to find with how little trepidation she set about this duty; certain memories crowded upon her mind, indeed, at the first glance, as they had done when she had visited the place in Mrs Morden's company, but they had become enfeebled by time and circumstance, and had no power to pain her as of old. The poor pictures on the wall representing sporting scenes, Richard had bought, out of his scanty pocket-money, when a boy; and she remembered well the pride he took in showing them to her, and how she had expressed her fears that his choice in art would not find favour with his Uncle Matthew, wherein she had proved a true prophet. Two little screens which she had painted for Richard in later years, but before he had taken to his wild courses, were on the mantel-piece, and on the arm-chair was a piece of lace she had worked for him. These things, that would have smitten her sore but a few months back, moved her but a little. But when, like a good housewife as she was, she looked to see that all was neat within the dressing-table drawers, she came upon more tender mementoes: a packet of her own letters which artless

Richard, who never used a key save for his watch, had placed in that unsecret spot ; and a cigar-case, worn with use, but still bright and gay with her own embroidery. The letters she hastened to destroy, as she had destroyed his own to her, lest, on some evil day, she should be led to read in those faded leaves the records of a spring-time that was never to be renewed, and which she had done her best to forget ; but the cigar-case she left where it was. Yet, curiously enough, the discovery of it affected her more than that of the letters.

How strange it seemed that Richard, when he left his home, should not have taken his cigar-case with him. Not because she had given it to him—his conduct showed that *that* circumstance would have weighed with him but very little, as also that he did not omit to take it, lest the memory of her should vex him through association with it ; but how sudden and undesigned must have been his departure, since an article so essential to his convenience had escaped his mind. He had been a great smoker, and was wont to take a cigar after each of his meals.

For more than an hour, Maggie sat that day in Richard's room thinking of its lost tenant, not with painful yearning, as of yore, but with a certain terrible apprehension that had never entered into her mind before. The letter he had left behind him, the state of his pecuniary affairs, and above all, that presentation of the cheque, days after his disappearance, had all tended to convince her as they had convinced others, that Richard had not only desired to leave Hilton, but had absolutely done so ; but now, for the first time, it struck her that there was yet another elucidation of the mystery : he might have gone, not to America, as some said, but to a still more distant land, and one from which there was no return : she might have been entertaining accusing thoughts, and steeling her heart, for the last twelve months, against a dead man !

This thought, though it froze her to the marrow, yet did not numb her to the sense that, if this were so, the slanderous tongues that spoke against John would never be put to silence. In the very extremity of her pity for Richard, she did not lose sight of the wrong that was being done to his brother; and her determination to redress it if she could was not one whit diminished. Only, she resolved, since her father was about to visit Rosebank, that she would consult him upon the matter in the first place, and her husband afterwards.

Accordingly, on the very afternoon of the engraver's arrival, and before John had returned from business, Maggie broached this subject; her father had been rallying her upon her improved looks, and on the cheerfulness (though she was grave enough just then) that had of late months been perceptible in her.

"You are twice as well, Maggie, as you were in Mitchell Street, and becoming as sprightly as a bird. 'My son is my son till he gets him a wife, my daughter's my daughter all my life,' says the proverb; but I tell you frankly that I am getting quite jealous of John, who is thus making you so independent of me."

"My husband is most kind and good to me," answered Maggie gravely; "and my only grief as concerns him is that he is not appreciated by others. Very cruel things are said about him, as I understand, father."

"Indeed! What things?"

"Slanders about him with relation to Richard."

"Well, then, all I can say is that the gossips have chosen the very subject of all others on which he is immaculate—absolutely irreproachable."

"I know it, but I wish to prove that he is so: to convince them beyond dispute that Richard left Hilton, and remains away from it, of his own free will."

"I am not so sure that that would be advisable," was the



old man's response. "Mind, in the first place, it would be necessary to produce Richard—and, for my part, I think, on all accounts, it is better that he should stay where he is."

"But we don't *know* where he is, father; that is the point I wish to talk to you about. If we could get to know, perhaps we could persuade him to communicate with us"—

"My dear child!" interrupted the engraver earnestly, "if you will take my advice, you will pay no heed to foolish talk and let well alone. If Richard meant to let you know his hiding-place he would do so: he is not a man to be persuaded out of his own plans whatever they are. Perhaps a part of them is to make his brother uncomfortable by this very means of ill-natured rumour. The more John helped him, the more he hated him."

"Don't, father,—don't!" pleaded Maggie. "I am not speaking of my lover, but of my husband's brother, and for my husband's sake. If you knew all, perhaps you would regret being so bitter against Richard. Suppose that he did not leave Hilton at all, but were now lying in his grave!"

"In his grave, Maggie? Why, we have proofs that he intended to leave Hilton, and even that he did so."

"I thought so myself until to-day. But I have found something—a little matter, but one which fills me with a dreadful doubt."

The engraver's face assumed a serious gravity; he himself had always had his suspicions that what Maggie suggested might really be the case, and though he was conscious that they rested mainly on the grounds of perverse prejudice, they still occasionally recurred to him. He had always thought that Dennis Blake knew more about Richard's disappearance than he chose to tell; his manner, when questioned upon the subject by John, had, to his observant eye, been false and shifty. It had come to his knowledge that Blake had been in possession of a large sum exactly at the period of Richard's disap-



pearance, who, as his brother stated, had left Rosebank well supplied with money. The cheque, indeed, cashed some days afterwards, being drawn to order, evidenced to Richard's not having been robbed of it by a mere footpad ; but he might have lost the sum in question, or a portion of it, to Blake at play, and been murdered after his signature had been obtained ! It was a horrible idea to entertain ; but it did not fill Herbert Thorne with horror, nor would it, perhaps, have so affected another who chanced to stand in his place. If to wish a man dead is to kill him, we have most of us been murderers in our hearts at one time or another. If our own life is threatened, we are not blamed for wishing him who menaces it in the safest custody ; and while Richard lived, something dearer than Thorne's own life was threatened—namely, the happiness of his daughter ; and though he would never himself have lifted a finger against him, or connived at such a crime, he would certainly at no time have been sorry to hear that such a pestilent fellow had disappeared from the earth's surface, and gone under it. At the same time, so far from feeling grateful to the man that murdered Richard, he would have loathed him as much as any other manslayer, and done his best to bring him to justice ; and the vague suspicions he harboured respecting Dennis Blake had made him only more hateful to him than heretofore. When Maggie said that "she had found something," it struck him at once that it was some piece of evidence in connection with this man, and in the same flash of thought it occurred to him : "And if it be so, shall I reveal to her my own ideas upon this point, or not ?" Blake had sunk somewhat suddenly from bad to worse, and was already a ruined and degraded man, of whom it might well be said, that his sin had found him out. What need was there to hunt this wretch to death, who, being at bay, might revenge himself upon them all, by telling hideous truths about the unhappy Richard ; or still more hideous lies,

such as he had told already, about Maggie herself. Upon the whole, he rapidly decided not to encourage her in her suspicions, unless the proofs were very strong.

It was a positive relief, therefore, to the engraver when he found that all his daughter had to tell him was, that Richard Milbank had left his cigar-case behind him. Such a communication would not have troubled him at all, except so far as it seemed to evidence a morbid interest in the man whom he had begun to flatter himself his daughter was learning to forget. If he had left his watch, indeed it might have suggested an intention to return; but his cigar-case! It seemed to him sheer folly to found so grave a supposition as that of a man's decease on such slight ground. But then Herbert Thorne was not an habitual smoker; he only took one pipe in the kitchen "the last thing" before he went to bed o' nights, and had no conception of the demands tobacco makes upon its votaries. Moreover, he had not studied Richard as the woman had done who loved him, and was consequently ignorant that not an hour of the day was wont to elapse without that little case, with "R. M." so delicately embroidered on it, being brought into requisition by the missing man.

If the engraver had less observation in his composition than his daughter, he had, however, more logic. "Why, don't you see, you little goose," urged he, "that your fact disproves your words? You say that it is impossible that Richard should have forgotten his cigar-case, and yet, since you find it in his room, it is certain he did forget it; and if he forgot it for five minutes, why not for five hours? or, at all events, for so long a time, that, finding himself, when he did miss it, so far away from home, it was not worth his while to return for it."

"I see," said Maggie reluctantly. But in reality she saw nothing: the argument was too strong for her to combat, but

the conviction in her own mind remained exactly as it was before. Moreover, the sudden trouble in her father's face, when she first began to speak upon this matter, had not escaped her. Was it possible that he really knew something of Richard's fate, perhaps even of his abiding-place, yet would not tell it, through distrust of her, or fear of disturbing her peace of mind? In the former case, he underrated her moral courage and her sense of duty; in the latter, he was mistaken in supposing she could be tranquil while the general voice unjustly accused her husband. She would confute that, and see him righted, at *all* hazards, if woman's wit could do it. So impatient did she become to effect this, that her father's stay at Rosebank, to which she had looked forward with such pleasure, became almost irksome to her, since, while he remained, she felt unable to commence her plans. He had already, as it were, declared himself inimical to them, and would, without doubt, throw the weight of his advice into the scale in favour of leaving matters as they were. And certainly, if the engraver had been appealed to, he would have so advised. Affairs seemed to him to be going on very well at Rosebank—better, perhaps, than in his heart of hearts he had expected them to go. That John was all tenderness and devotion, did not surprise him; but he was delighted to find that the devotion, at least, was reciprocated on Maggie's part. She studied her husband's wishes in all respects, which, from their very rarity, and his own reticence about them, was a difficult task. It would have been easier to please a man who likes his newspaper cut for him, his bacon at breakfast streaky, and is particular about having his greatcoat hung up by the loop, than silent, unexacting John; but Maggie showed that she understood her husband thoroughly; and where that is the case, thought the engraver, the pillars of domestic peace stand fast, and are not to be shaken. Nor had he to complain, as he had pre-

tended to do, out of the fulness of his joy at her content, that the father was neglected for the husband; she fell at once into her former pursuits to keep him company—for the old man loved to be at work, wherever he was—listened to all his scientific projects with a sympathising ear, and showed herself so like the Maggie that she had been ere the glamour of Richard's love had thrown itself around her, that, though he flattered himself he had put her suspicions to rest, it seemed to him it mattered little even if they still smouldered, for, whether alive or dead, that ne'er-do-well, her former lover would never have the power to trouble her more.



CHAPTER XXI.

DARBY AND JOAN.

"I AM afraid you will miss your father," said John tenderly, as he and Maggie sat once more, Darby and Joan, together, over their tea, on the evening of the engraver's departure. "Your life is a very humdrum one, I fear, my darling, with little to enliven it."

"I do not find it humdrum, John, if that means tedious," was Maggie's quiet answer; "even when you're away I'm never dull."

"I know it, Maggie; you are diligence itself. But employment does not always mean happiness; one works sometimes only to avoid thinking—that is, I mean some people do," added he quickly. "Your father, it is true, loves work for its own sake; work, too, such as his projected inventions, which seem doomed to come to nothing."

"Not now, husband," answered Maggie softly. "You do good by stealth, and blush even to find it known to me. He has found a partner, he told me, in London, who is willing to share the expense of patenting his terminable ink. Do you suppose I did not guess who that partner was?"

"You did not tell him, I do hope?"

"Not I. I read your wish to make him believe the offer sprang from genuine appreciation of the merits of his invention. He hopes by means of it to pay back to you the loan you advanced to him; that is, even at the best, you will reimburse

yourself out of one pocket for the losses of the other. It seemed to me so strange that he should be so easily tricked."

"Why so, when he has a just confidence in the results of his own ingenuity?"

"Of course that blinds him; but his knowledge of your generous delicacy ought to have put him on his guard. How little does my father know you, John! I wish he did; I wish everybody did."

She felt her pulses beating high; she was on the verge of that delicate subject which she had made up her mind to broach that night; her next sentence was to carry her into it. How little he suspected it, as he sat smiling gravely at her earnest manner.

"What is anybody's opinion to me, Maggie, or everybody's, if only I have your good word!"

"To me, at all events, it is a great deal, John; I mean as respects yourself. I wish the world to understand you as I do." She still hesitated, like a bather who sees the water deep and dark and cold, and shudders on the brink ere he takes his plunge.

"John, dear"—her voice shook, and the hand which she laid tenderly on his trembled like a rose-leaf—"I wish you would let me write to Richard."

"To Richard!" he echoed, dropping the cup of tea, he held, upon the floor, where it was smashed to atoms, yet taking not the least notice of that catastrophe. "Great Heaven! To Richard?"

She had expected him to be deeply moved, but the horror and amazement depicted on his features fairly terrified her.

"Dear husband, do not look like that," pleaded she; "I had not thought to distress you so exceedingly. The past is past with me, and gives me no such pain in recurring to it. You are too noble to be jealous, and I should be vile indeed

to give you cause even in thought. It is not of Richard that was once my lover that I wish to speak, but of our brother Richard."

"I know, I know!" answered he impatiently; "but why should we speak of him? What good can come of it? He is gone. I am here. Nothing can alter that. Why should you torture me?"

"For your own sake, John; or, if *you* do not heed what men say of you, then for mine," answered Maggie firmly. "Every word they utter against you respecting him to whom you have been so uniformly kind, stabs me to the heart. I know it to be false, but I wish to prove it so."

"What is it that men say about me?" inquired John. His voice was so hoarse, his look so haggard, that Maggie already repented of having ventured on this delicate ground, and would have retraced her footsteps, but it was too late. "Come," said he gently, but firmly, "since you have told me thus far, you must tell me all. What is it that I am accused of?"

"They say that you connived at Richard's leaving home, and were glad of it."

"Then they say truth," was the unexpected reply. "How could I help being glad of it?"

"Yes; but the connivance, John. They say you bought his absence from the factory."

"Is it so new a thing, then, for one man to buy another out of a business, especially when he has half-ruined it? If he received the equivalent, what matters?"

"But there was yet another reason, John, why you wished Richard away, they say," continued Maggie, in a trembling voice, "and here I *know* that they speak falsely. They dared to hint that you were scheming from the first to rob Richard of my love; that even at the time he thought me his, the more you had resolved to make me yours; and when he had

brought his fortunes to the lowest ebb, you took advantage of his necessities to buy me of him."

"Is that *all*?" asked John slowly.

"All! husband! Is it not enough? Do you not feel for me, as I feel for you, when such things are said? Or has the love which you were once content to see upon one side, gone wholly over to the other?"

"If it has gone but a little, Maggie, I am quite content," answered the other, sighing heavily. "I was afraid it had not, since I have certainly lost none. Are you angry with me because I asked if that was all? When men begin to lie, why should they stop at this point or at that!"

"Then they do lie?" cried Maggie eagerly. "You never played the traitor to poor Richard even in your heart?"

"No; never!"

"And if he could come back, and stand here now"——

"Hush, hush!" interrupted John, with a scared face, and holding up his hand for silence.

"What is it? I did not hear anything."

"Nor I," said he, but still with a distracted air. "I wished you not to speak so loud, that's all."

"I say, John, if Richard should return, or could communicate with us, he would himself acquit you of this charge, would hold you innocent."

"Yes, yes; I swear it!" exclaimed the other earnestly; "the All-seeing Eye above us holds me so."

"I knew it! Listen, then, to me, John. I am your own true faithful wife. Nothing can part us, nothing make me undervalue you. I can write to him as to my own father; let me do so."

"Let you write to Richard!" answered he, looking up quickly from the ground. "How can that be?"

"That is another matter, John; I only want your leave. I would write to him as a sister: he has lost all claim to think

of me as—as anything else ; and I would appeal to him as to a brother, yours and mine. I would let him know what injury his long silence is doing you ; I would appeal to him, as a man of feeling and honour, to write one line—not of forgiveness, he has nothing to forgive—but of reconciliation. I would bid him tell us the whole story of his absence, or, at least, so much as would clear your name of all connivance with it.”

“You would have no reply,” answered John coldly.

“Perhaps not. It is possible, of course—I think sometimes that it must be so—that your brother is no more. Oh, pardon me for giving you such pain, John ; but you know not what I suffer ! This talk will soon be over, and then we shall forget it ; but what these base people say, they will go on saying for ever, and I shall have to listen.”

“Listen !” echoed her husband—“listen !” Again his face wore that scared look, again his hand was raised mechanically, then, trembling, sank upon the table. “I beg your pardon, love ; what was it you said last ? ‘This talk will soon be over.’ Let it be so.”

“But a few words more, dear. I say, if Richard be dead (which God forbid !), or will not answer me, we shall still be in no worse position than at present. What harm can there be in writing ? I ought to have done it long ago, for his own sake” (here she blushed) ; “indeed, I think I ought ; but for your own, I am sure of it ! Do, do, John, let me write to Richard !”

“Write to him ! Why, whither would you write.”

“I do not know ; I thought *you* would help me there.”

“*I* help you ?” answered her husband, with a quick suspicious glance. “How should *I* help you ? Why I more than others ? You read the letter which he left at parting ; so did your father and the rest. I know no more of where he is than you.”

"But you may suspect, John; and by your face I think you do."

"My face;" cried he, rising suddenly, and going to the looking-glass. "What is the matter with my face?"

"Nothing, John—to *your* eyes, perhaps; but I am your wife, and skilled to read in it what others miss. You may not know where Richard is, but you can make a shrewd guess at it. Did he never speak to you of going away before he wrote that letter?"

"Well, yes, he did, but very vaguely. My impression is that he was thinking of going to America."

"Indeed? Then it chimes with mine, John!" cried Maggie eagerly. "Once, long ago, just after your uncle's death, he spoke to me of emigrating to New York."

"That's like enough," answered the other, returning to his own quiet tones: he had sat down again, and, teaspoon in hand, was making lines upon the table with a thoughtful air. "There would be no harm in writing to New York, Maggie;" and then he sighed, as though he would have added, "and no good."

"At all events, John, in doing that I should feel I am doing *something*. I think we owe that much to him, or at least that *I* do, and I am sure I owe it to you. I will write the letter this very night, and when it is finished, you shall tell me whether you approve of the contents. If he has any desire to hear from us at all, he would give himself the only chance there was, would he not, John, and inquire for letters at the Poste Restante?"

"I suppose so," answered he mechanically.

"And you really think that this is the best course we can adopt?"

"I know of no other. But, in my opinion it will be labour in vain."

"Not in vain, John, so far as I am concerned," answered Maggie quietly, "whether Richard writes or not."

Her husband made no reply, and presently went up-stairs, where he remained for a considerable time. On his return, he cast a nervous look towards the table, at which she sat busily engaged.

"Are you writing, Maggie?"

"Yes, dear: this is some work I am doing for my father. It is an experiment in Terminable Ink. Exactly six weeks from this date, if his calculations are correct, this sheet of paper will be blank. It will not fade in the meantime, even up to the very day before—But I forgot; I am speaking to his partner in the patent. It seems to me an invention which, however ingenious, can never be made profitable."

A smile flitted across his grave face, and left it graver. "It will not make our fortunes, dear."

"How good and kind you are, John!" said Maggie softly. "I am so sorry to have pained you to-night. Here is the letter to Richard. I have thought over its contents for months, and had only to set them down. Will you not read it?"

"No, Maggie;" he pushed the note away with his hand, not peevishly, but with a slow, determined motion. "Whatever you have thought it right to say, must needs be right."

The generous delicacy that made him forbear to peruse her words—the first she had ever addressed to Richard since they two were sundered—touched her heart.

"Husband," cried she, rising from her chair and approaching him, "I told you once that I could never love you: I was wrong. The love has come, and through him who seemed to be its obstacle." She was about to caress him, but into his wan, pale face there stole the vacant listening look that she had noticed twice before that evening, and it chilled her.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LETTER.

FOR weeks nothing more was said between wife and husband upon the subject of Richard ; but every morning, so soon as time permitted of the arrival of an answer to her letter, Maggie listened with eagerness to the postman's ring, and felt sick at heart when no news came from beyond seas. Besides her desire to justify her husband in the world's eyes, she had a passionate wish that the two brothers should be reconciled, and Richard's silence seemed to portend that this would never be. Of course, he might not be at New York, but in the fact that he was there lay her only hope. It was almost certain that he would never communicate with home again of his own free will ; but she had confidence in the effect of her appeal to him, should it ever reach his hands. John, on the other hand, evinced no sign of expectation, and appeared to have dismissed the subject from his mind.

At last, one morning, as they sat at breakfast, Mrs Morden put a letter in her hand, with a cheerful—"From foreign parts, I think, ma'am ;" and Maggie saw that it had the New York postmark. Her heart beat violently, but she concealed her agitation, and left the letter on the table till the house-keeper had cleared away the things, a duty which she always performed herself. Then so soon as she had left the room—"John, the letter has come," said Maggie gravely.

John looked up from the newspaper, in which he was

engaged with an air of enforced interest, and answered "What letter?"

It seemed extraordinary to her that he should be so indifferent concerning a matter which had filled her own mind for so long, and she cast at him, for the first time in her life, a look of keen reproach. "Ten thousand pardons, Maggie!" cried he; "but for the moment I had forgotten."

"O John! it is not from Richard himself; it is not his handwriting! Somebody else has written, perhaps to say— Oh, I dare not open it!"

"Why, Maggie, it is an official communication, that is all. See! it is stamped, 'From the Dead-letter Office.'"

"The Dead-letter Office!" Maggie shuddered, and hid her face in her hands.

"My darling, those words mean nothing, except that the person to whom the enclosure was addressed has not called for it within a certain time. This is simply your own letter come back again. For my part, I expected nothing else."

"John, you are deceiving me!" exclaimed Maggie. "You do it for my sake, but it is cruel. You are affecting a calmness which you do not feel. Your hand is trembling, though your speech is firm. Be candid with me. I can bear to hear the truth. You know something that I don't know about Richard."

"I? How should I know?"

If he had been really affecting unconcern, her accusation had baffled him, and he had given up the deception altogether. His face had become deadly pale, and his voice, usually so calm and measured, quavered like that of an old man, as he went on complainingly: "Have you not read the words Richard left behind him? And what can I have heard since those were written?"

"I cannot tell, John, but it seems to me that you are in possession of some fact which, for my sake, as you imagine

you keep from me. I think, too, that my father also knows more about Richard than he chooses to tell."

"Indeed!" said John more briskly. "Then you had better tax him with it, for I do assure you his knowledge is not shared by me."

Maggie remained silent and thoughtful for a full minute, during which her husband kept his eyes upon her, like one who fears a blow.

"Dear John," said she at last, "this subject is a painful one to both of us, and I, for my part, do not wish to recur to it. If you can really put the matter at rest which troubles me, for Heaven's sake do so! I ask you, on your honour, has anything come to your knowledge, since Richard's departure, to make you conclude him dead?"

"Dead?" repeated her husband, in a voice so low that it scarcely reached her ears—"dead? How came you to think of that? Hush! Don't talk of it here; let us come out into the garden."

He stepped through the open window as he spoke, and Maggie followed him with trembling limbs. It seemed to her that she was on the verge of some terrible secret, which his lips would reveal only where none could overhear it. He led her to the extremity of the garden, where a rustic bower with its bench had been newly built. It was in structure very different from the arbour built upon the leads in Mitchell Street, yet, somehow, it reminded her of it, and of that interview with Richard wherein he had won her consent to their marriage. Behind this bower, instead of lines of rail, lay a gravel-pit, long unworked—though some of its contents had been used to make the garden-paths by old Matthew Thurle, and this was surrounded by a little wood, or, as the folk at Hilton called it, a spinney. It was a very lonely and secluded spot indeed.

"Now, tell me, Maggie," said John, taking her hand in

his, but looking on the ground, "why you think—what you said just now about Richard."

"I did not say I thought it, John; I asked you for your own opinion."

"I have none to offer, Maggie. But perhaps I may have one, when you have told me yours. I have not thought of the matter as you have done; let us talk it over now—for the last time."

The hand that lay in hers was cold as marble, and his face looked more than ever "like a statue," as she had heard folk term it.

"I think Richard is dead, John, for two reasons: partly from what I know of his character, with which his sudden disappearance, without a word of warning, is wholly inconsistent; but especially from his silence since. He might not have forgiven us—though I hope he would—but he would certainly have written, either in forgiveness or in reproach, when he heard of your marriage."

"But what if he has never heard?"

"That seems very unlikely. It is impossible he could have been so indifferent to what happened after his departure. No, no; if he lives, he knows!"

"I see," said John, with quiet gravity, and checking off, as it seemed, these arguments upon his fingers; "you think him dead because he has acted inconsistently with your ideas of him, is that your only reason?"

"It is not. I am convinced, from certain circumstances, that his departure was hurried—not such as it would have been had he had any long journey in contemplation."

"What circumstances?"

"Well, they are trifling in themselves; but for one thing, he left his cigar-case"——

"But that was empty," was John's quick reply; "at least," added he, "I think Mrs Morden said so."

"Yes, it was empty," said Maggie thoughtfully. "He told me once that he never went to bed so long as he had a cigar in his pocket. He must have meant, therefore, to go to bed, when he had done his talk with you that night; then changed his mind, and gone into the town.—Do you think it humanly possible, John, that he was made away with?"

"Made away with!" echoed John, in a hoarse whisper. "Do you mean murdered?"

Maggie moved her head in assent; there was a lump in her throat that would not let her speak.

"No, no, Maggie: he was not—*that*. I am certain of it. He had many evil friends in Hilton, but not one enemy—except himself."

"Not Dennis Blake?"

"Nay, this is not right, Maggie. You must not entertain unjust thoughts. The man you speak of is a worthless profligate, but quite incapable of such a crime. I, of all men, have no cause to defend him; but you are doing Blake wrong."

"I am not so sure, John. There are some suspicious circumstances which have come to my knowledge about that person. Fanny—who has the charge of little Willie, you know—has told me of them. She told my father, who, it seems, bade her hold her tongue, I don't doubt, to spare me."

"And he was quite right," observed John earnestly, "not only on your account, but in the interests of common justice. You despise the malicious rumours current against myself; and yet you give ear to the idle tattle of a servant-girl, which would brand a fellow-creature with the worst of crimes!"

"But perhaps it is not idle tattle. She knows the woman in whose house Blake lodged, and she tells her that some one entered it after two o'clock on the morning of Richard's dis-

appearance ; that she heard Blake go down and let that person in."

"That is like enough," muttered John thoughtfully.

"And that was the hour at which you parted from Richard, was it not?"

"It was about that time."

"Well, the woman says, that though she heard this man come in"——

"How do you know it *was* a man?" inquired John quickly.

"She heard his footstep on the stairs, and she says it was Richard's footstep, with which she was familiar, for he often used to go and play cards with her lodger late at night."

"Well, supposing it *was* Richard? She heard him come and go ; what then?"

"She did not hear him go. She might have been asleep, of course, when he went away ; but so it was. And when you asked Blake, on that very day, whether Richard had been to his rooms the previous night, he denied it. I remember father saying at the time that he was sure Blake was telling a lie."

"That may be so or not, Maggie," answered her husband gravely, and rising from his seat ; "but I can tell you this, that the very last man in all Hilton to do harm to my poor brother would have been Dennis Blake. His death would have been greatly to his disadvantage, for Richard was an annuity to him. You are the wisest and best of womankind, Maggie, but you are still a woman, warped by prejudice, and incapable of an unbiassed judgment. Pray, let me hear of this no more."

Maggie felt that their talk was over, and the topic of it sealed for ever.

Her husband had shown, for the first time, what was for

him a deep displeasure. She did not respect him less on that account ; for had it not been caused by her accusation of his enemy ? How good and just he was ! How slow to impute evil, even to the worst of men, and those who had done him the worst injuries !

Without being satisfied by his arguments, she was convinced, and that is as much as any husband can expect—even the most sanguine.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CORPSE CANDLE.

To dismiss a haunting subject from our thoughts, out of regard to the wishes of others, is a difficult, but, to a dutiful mind, not an impossible task. If Maggie had loved her husband more, and respected him less, perhaps she could not have been so obedient ; but as it was, she did her best to cease to speculate on Richard's fate, since, whenever she did so, she found her suspicions centring upon the man for whose innocence she had John's own word, which was law to her. There was reason, too, she was obliged to confess, upon John's side in this matter, as well as authority. A year ago, though she had even then good cause to loathe and despise the man, it would never have occurred to her to impute such a heinous crime to Dennis Blake as the murder of his friend. But hearing from time to time, partly from her father, chiefly from talkative Mrs Morden, how low he was falling—first expelled from his club ; then passing a vagabond life in bar-rooms and billiard-rooms ; eventually an outcast and a sot, and clothed in rags, as she had seen him with her own eyes in the public streets—her views of him had insensibly received their colour from his circumstances. To suppose a man who dresses in the height of fashion and keeps a riding-horse guilty of slaying a fellow-creature for the contents of his purse requires a stretch of imagination, not in the straight line, but at the angle leading to melodrama ; whereas, in rags and want, and

surrounded with the lurid halo of evil courses, the same personage may be credited with anything. Moreover, the idea of Richard being dead at all did not seem to be entertained by any one except herself, who, alas, had been so wrong about him, while others had been proved right. So she went about her household duties with greater diligence than ever; pursued the old handiwork that she had suffered to fall into disuse; and especially occupied herself with little Willie less than she had been wont to do. The child was growing strikingly like his father, and whenever she looked upon him, Richard seemed to stand before her, pale and mournful, as though reproaching her, not with her marriage, for her conscience held her clear upon that score, but with the complacency with which his mysterious fate had been accepted, and of which such advantages had been reaped without question. For was not her father cheerful, convalescent, and placed above the reach of want; and was not she herself, if not high placed, far above what she could have hoped to be as Richard's wife, and tended by loving hands, that would not let the very winds of heaven visit her too roughly—and had not all this edifice of prosperity been built, as it were, out of the ruins of lost Richard?

If Maggie had had children of her own, the task she had imposed upon herself would have been easier; "baby fingers, waxen touches," would have driven from her breast those morbid fancies; the prattle of their infant tongues would have drowned the voice that seemed to appeal to her from the tomb; and, even as it was, it was growing less and less importunate, when a circumstance occurred that gave it a significance it had never possessed before.

Maggie was passing to her own room one night in early winter, when at the staircase window she came upon the housekeeper looking intently out of it; not having her trumpet in her ear, the old woman did not perceive her mistress's

approach, but continued her scrutiny, at the same time muttering to herself.

"It is gone now, but it was there a minute ago, I'll swear it!" murmured she.

"What is it you are looking at, Mrs Morden? You must have good eyes to pierce through such a night as this."

The housekeeper turned towards her a face that, in the candle-light, showed a very different complexion to its ordinary apple-like hue, and answered hastily: "Oh, nothing, ma'am; I was only just a-going to draw down the blind, which Lucy has forgotten!"

"I see there is nothing now; but what was that you did see? I heard you say you saw something."

"Well, it might have been a shooting star, but it seemed too near the ground. Lucy saw it too last night, she says, and that's what made me take such notice. But, lor', them girls will say anything, especially if they have heard people say it before."

"What is it she has heard people say?" asked Maggie. Her mind misgave her that it was something of which she had better be ignorant; the housekeeper's observation respecting Lucy having at once recalled the gossip of Willie's nurse to her remembrance; but was it not even worse to be the victim of such a morbid apprehension, than to grapple with it at once?

"It is better to let such foolish tales die out of their own selves," said Mrs Morden, with a didactic air, "than to encourage them by paying them any attention."

"Nevertheless, I must ask you to speak out," answered Maggie firmly. "Your occupation at this window did not seem much like the discouragement you recommend, I think. Please to come into my room."

"If you insist upon knowing what I was looking for, why, I must tell you," replied the old woman reluctantly, as she

followed her mistress to her chamber, and closed the door behind her; "but it's not a pleasant thing to repeat, and will be painful to you to hear, especially since you have been apt to cut me short whenever I have spoken of the matter before; I mean of poor Mr Richard's going away, and what has been said about it."

"What has Richard's going away to do with your looking out of that window?"

"Well, nothing at all, so far as I know. It's not my story, mistress; Heaven forbid! but our Lucy, she picks up all the rubbish that is going about, and this is some of it."

If Mrs Morden thought to weary her mistress out by her prolixity, as she often did her master, and thereby gain her ends, which were in this instance to avoid the required explanation, she was deceived. Maggie had seated herself by the bedroom fire—one of the many luxuries with which her husband's solicitude had provided her, but which would otherwise have never occurred to her to desire—and was listening with every mark of attention, though with averted face.

"You see it's got about of late—though I am sure I don't know why, ma'am, unless it's because one has been so long without a scrap of news—that poor Mr Richard is dead; and more than that, that he's been made away with."

Maggie was prepared for something which would demand some exercise of self-control, or else she would surely have betrayed the shock which this announcement cost her, chiming in as it did with her own convictions, and corroborating the suspicions she would have fain dispelled. She kept her eyes, however, fixed upon the glowing embers, and maintained a resolute silence.

"Their notion is, ma'am," resumed the old woman, who, now that the ice seemed broken, and without any catastrophe, began to feel her usual gusto in narration, "that he was

robbed and murdered, and then hidden away somewhere underground. But murder will always out, and when man cannot discover it, Heaven takes the matter into its own hand. A flame, for example, is said to flicker over the place where the body is hidden; and that's true, for I've read it in a book. Only, of course, it's very wrong and foolish to suppose anything of the sort with respect to poor Master Richard, who may come back any day, alive and well, just as likely as not; and, as to his being murdered, what *I* say is, Who could have hurt a hair of his head? Why, not a man in all Hilton, unless, to be sure, it were that there Dennis Blake."

"Dennis Blake! What makes you think so ill of him?"

"Well, he's a bad lot, Miss Maggie"—the housekeeper often called her young mistress, in moments of confidence, by her maiden name. "He was the very worst of all those folks that poor Master Richard brought to this house; he was not so clever as some, but he was the wickedest. Servants see things sometimes as gentlefolks and guests never suspect. I've gone into the parlour to put the supper away, when none of them have noticed me, being so intent upon their game, and I've seen Mr Blake play tricks, I'm sure of it, with the big cards. Now, a man as would cheat his friend, would, in my opinion, murder him; that is, if he got the chance, and could feel himself pretty safe when he did it."

"It is commonly reported, then, that Dennis Blake committed this crime?"

"Well, no, ma'am; I can't say that: some say it's one man, and some say it's another. What I says is, if it's *anybody*, it's that man Blake. It's nobody nearer home, I'll take my oath on't."

"Nobody nearer home!" exclaimed Maggie, with unfeigned astonishment. "Why, who *should* it be?"

Her surprise alarmed the old woman more than her indignation would have done: she did not venture to pursue her

own suggestion, but hastened, with nervous trepidation, to efface its effect. "I said that, wherever the body might be, there was no body near our house—such as in the wood-house. That is where the light has been seen once or twice, they say, late o' nights, and at which you saw me looking from the staircase window. There really was a light, though it shone but for an instant; though, as for its being a corpse-candle, as Mrs—— Lor, ma'am, you are never going to tell Master John?"

"I am going to tell him there's a light in the wood-house; why not?" replied Maggie vehemently, but pausing with her hand on the door. She had realised at last the horrible accusation against her husband. She must do something; she could not sit quiet in that room until he came, and then be silent. "If there are thieves in the garden, am I not to tell?" Without waiting to hear further remonstrance she ran downstairs to the parlour, which she had just quitted. She had left her husband reading near the table, but he was now standing with his elbow on the mantel-piece, looking very grave and sad.

"What is it, Maggie? I thought you had gone to bed."

"Yes; but there is some one in the garden: a light has been seen in the tool-house but five minutes ago."

"Indeed! I will go and see."

She would have given much could all those revilers, who invented these foul lies about John Milbank, have beheld him now, as he calmly took his hat down from its peg in the little lobby, and walked forth unarmed into the night. Did that resolute face betray a guilty conscience, or that firm step betoken the courage of despair? He looked back once with an assuring smile as she stood candle in hand, to watch him out of doors, and then was gone.

"He was some time away, perhaps five minutes, which

seemed thrice five to her, but presently returned with the same quiet face.

"There is no one in the tool-house, Maggie, nor has there been, so far as I could see. It must have been your fancy."

"It was not mine at all; it was Mrs Morden who saw the light, or thought she saw it," answered Maggie with indignation. She was not so angry with the housekeeper as with herself for having been vexed with her vulgar terrors, and for having listened even involuntarily, to that hateful story, born of malice and superstition, respecting the corpse-candle. Nevertheless her heart quaked within her when her husband summoned the old woman, lest she should blurt out her disbelief in it (as she had done to herself), under the impression that she (Maggie) had told it to her master. But all John had to ask was when the light in the tool-house had been seen and how often; to which Mrs Morden's answers were, for once, direct and short enough. It had been seen but thrice, and always about the same hour, between eleven and midnight; on the other hand, the situation of the spot was such, as respected the house, that it could only be seen from the kitchen and stair-case windows.

It was evident John Milbank attached but little importance to the affair; and with the remark that he would have the tools brought within doors on the morrow, after which there would be nothing in the outhouse to be stolen save the stack of fuel for winter use, he seemed to dismiss the subject from his mind. Not so poor Maggie; the peace that she had fondly hoped was growing within her was by this paltry incident nipped as with sudden frost; or rather rank Calumny had grown so high as quite to stifle it; her thoughts returned to that forbidden channel of Richard's fate with redoubled force.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A NIGHT ALARM.

It was more than a week after that stir about the light in the garden, that Maggie was awakened from slumber by what she at first fancied was the striking of the clock upon the stairs. With drowsy semi-consciousness, she found herself counting the strokes, and wondering that it was not yet the midnight hour; it seemed to her that they were uneven; but if they had been one or two, she would probably have fallen asleep again, without mental investigation of the matter, but when they stopped at eleven she was broad awake. It was not only that such could not be the time, since she had retired to rest after that hour, but it also inconsequentially occurred to her that it was between eleven and twelve that the mysterious light had been seep in the tool-house. The two inexplicable circumstances wove themselves together in her mind, and filled it with a nameless dread. Then, as she lay quite still, listening and thinking, the clock began to strike again—one, two, three—with even a duller thud than usual, and then for an instant the little house seemed shaken to its foundations.

"John, John!" cried she, in the hushed voice in which Terror speaks when Reason is not disturbed; "did you hear that?" He did not answer; and in his silence there was another cause of alarm, because that wondrous sense for which we have no name, but which warns us of the presence

of a fellow-creature, thinking with ourselves, or of us, when he would fain have us believe otherwise, convinced her that her husband was awake. He suffered much from sleeplessness, but when he did sleep it was heavily, and he drew his breath with evenness and regularity, as such sleepers do. His breathing was regular and even now, but it was not natural; and, pitch-dark as it was, she knew that his eyes were open, and that he was listening as intently as herself. All was silent now, but she felt that not in the lapse of years could she ever be persuaded to attribute what she had just heard to fancy.

"O John! I am so frightened?" continued Maggie; "pray speak to me!"

"What is it, darling? Did you speak?"

His words were tender, but his voice was hoarse and broken; if she had not known him to be a man to whom fear was unknown, she would have thought it shaken with fear.

"There is some one in the house—or under it: I am certain of it, John. There was a shock just now like that of an earthquake."

"I did not hear it," was his cold reply.

"Nor the clock that struck eleven and then three? What can it mean?"

"It means that you have been dreaming, Maggie."

"I have not been dreaming," answered she vehemently. "Let me strike a light." She was about to rise, but he laid his hand upon her arm—a hand as strong and as cold as iron.

"No, Maggie; you will catch your death such a night as this. I will get up myself if—if it comes again."

"Then you did hear it?"

"I heard something fall. You are not so used to lie awake as I am, or the voices of the night would not alarm you. How quiet everything is now."

Stillness reigned supreme; the very tick of that clock on



the stairs could be heard as it marked the time towards the blessed daylight ; and presently, with a whirl and a rattle, it struck five.

"There !" cried he triumphantly ; "is that an hour, think you, for burglars to be about a house ? Go to sleep again ; forget your foolish fears."

Maggie did not reply ; she was thinking how much more sharp was the ring of the clock than the sound which she had taken for it. Sleep was not to be thought of ; but she lay mute and still ; and when the first streaks of daylight stole into the room, her husband softly rose, and she heard him stand and listen on the stairs, and then descend into the parlour, which lay immediately beneath their own apartment. She was not frightened now, but intensely curious, the more so because her husband had shown himself curious too. She had an idea that he would rather she should not have heard him rise, yet, when he returned, she could not abstain from questioning him.

"Did you find anything, John, to explain that dreadful noise last night ?"

"Why, yes, my dear. Your earthquake was caused by the fall of the *Plains of Heaven*. The nail seems to have given way, and then down it came."

This was a huge engraving of Martin's famous picture, that the Linches had given them as a marriage present, and which occupied one whole side of the little room. What seemed very strange to Maggie, was that, notwithstanding its great weight, it was quite uninjured, and even the glass unbroken ; and she half suspected that, in his eagerness to account for what had caused her such great alarm, her husband had taken the picture down himself, and laid it on the floor.

However, nothing more was said between them upon the subject ; and upon inquiring of the servant-maid it turned out that no noise had disturbed her ; the slumber of such

girls, however, as her mistress was aware, is commonly very sound, and moreover, she slept in an attic, removed by another floor from the locality of the disturbance. When the shades of evening began to fall that day, Maggie felt more nervous than she would have cared to own, and though, in accordance with her husband's wish, she retired to rest earlier than usual, by reason of her "bad night," it seemed to her that she should never get to sleep. If, however, there is one means to woo the drowsy god more certain than another—that is, if all are not alike useless, from counting imaginary sheep to repeating *Paradise Regained*—it is watching and listening; and when the eleventh hour, which she had grown somehow to associate with the uncanny sound that haunted her, had come and gone, she succumbed to her fatigues of mind and body. Something worse, however, than unrest awaited her: a terrible dream, wherein she seemed to be buried alive in a stone vault; one person only knew of it—her husband; and though he worked away day and night with a pickaxe to remove the stones and rescue her, his progress was very slow, and she felt her vital powers deserting her. It seemed to her that he had begun his toil where the wall was thickest, and she strove in vain to make her voice heard through the stone, and to direct him elsewhere. In her struggles to do so, she awoke, and before that sense of freedom and relief which comes so slowly to him who wakens from a nightmare could fully dawn, she was beset by a new horror. She was awake, she knew, and safe in her own bed, and yet there were the sounds of the pickaxe—one, two, three—and every now and then the thud of a falling stone, just as she heard them in her dream.

"John, John! that noise again! Do you hear it now? Wake, wake!" She felt, as before, quite certain that he was wide awake, but cried out thus from terror, and mere yearning for companionship.

"I hear it," answered her husband faintly, like one who is an eager listener. "It is rats in the basement."

"It is *not* rats, John," replied she confidently. "We had them in Mitchell Street very badly, but they never made a noise like that. If a shock comes such as came last night" — The words had scarcely left her lips when a shock, even more violent than on the previous occasion, did come, so that the very floor beneath them seemed to tremble.

"That came from the parlour, or else from the cellar beneath it, John. Let me strike a light." Before he could restrain or even forbid her, Maggie had leaped out of bed, and lit her candle. Its tiny rays, in place of shedding on her that comfort which light alone can give in such moments of terror, disclosed a new object of alarm. Her husband was sitting up in bed, pale and ghastly, his eyes starting from their sockets, and with that awful look of expectation in them, which she had noticed on the day when she first proposed communicating with Richard. Since she knew that he had the heart of a lion, this spectacle of him overcome with abject fear affected her more than even the very cause of his alarm.

"Dear husband," cried she consolingly, and even in that terrible moment careful to hide her perception of his weakness, "you are ill, and shiver with the cold. There is no need for you to rise, since, if thieves are about the house, they will see the candle, and know that some of us are stirring, which will pack them off as quickly as the sight of yourself."

"It is not thieves," muttered her husband hoarsely, and his teeth chattered together as he spoke.

"But what else *can* it be?" reasoned Maggie, her ears less attentive for his reply than for the sounds beneath, which still continued, though with less distinctness.

"Stay; I have it: it must be some one breaking into the cellar."

In an instant her husband was out of bed, and had thrown his dressing-gown around him, in the pocket of which he slipped a life-preserver. So terrible was the anger in his pale face that she cried out as he left the room : " You would not kill a man for stealing wine, John ! "

" Stay here, Maggie ; don't move," was his only answer, given in a voice of authority, and almost of menace, such as he had never used before. His temporary panic seemed to have quite passed away, and he was himself again ; strong, resolute, and a terror to evil-doers, she feared not for him at all, but only for the life of the thieving wretch who should chance to cross him. Instead of the slow and hesitating step with which he had descended into the parlour on the previous morning, he took the stairs in three bounds, and the next instant she heard him open the front door and leave the house. She was not surprised at this, for if there had been any attempt to steal the wine from the cellar, it must needs have been made from the outside. Now all was silence. For full twenty minutes she remained watching and waiting, but restrained by her husband's injunctions from making any effort to seek him. She had understood from his manner of forbidding her to leave the room that he did not wish the servants to be roused or made acquainted with what had happened. With fingers that trembled even more with anxiety than with cold—though it was a very bitter December night—she, however, partially dressed herself, in case her presence should be required. The room looked out to the front, in the contrary direction from that which her husband had taken, and in any case it was too dark to make out any object, save close at hand ; but she had thrown up the sash, and, having put out her candle, sat at the open window, listening with intense anxiety. The security she had felt about his personal safety was not shaken ; if there had been a struggle of any kind, it must have reached her in that still

night; nay, she felt certain that if John had spoken, far less cried out, on the opposite side of the house, she must have heard him. What sort of robber, then, must this be, who, on being discovered at his nefarious trade, neither spoke nor was spoken to? She had begun to think that her husband had discovered nothing, and was making a perambulation of the whole premises, when she heard footsteps coming towards her from an unexpected direction—that of the tool-house. They were those of more than one person, and moved so very stealthily that, had she not caught their craunch upon the gravel as they crossed from lawn to lawn, they might have escaped her attention. Then, for the first time since her husband left her, she entertained apprehensions for his safety. Was it possible that these men, whoever they were, had overpowered and disabled him, and were now coming to rob the house? For herself she felt no fear; on the contrary, a firm resolve to recognise these ruffians, and avenge their victim, took possession of her mind. She leaned out of the window, and peered keenly down into the darkness. The men were now immediately beneath her, and about to enter the front door, which had not been closed. One of them was her husband; the other she could not make out, yet his form did not seem wholly unfamiliar to her. Who *could* it be? And why was John bringing him under his roof after such a deed? He was not his prisoner, for her husband was leading the way, and the other was following. The door was closed behind them softly, and presently she heard in the parlour the quick spurt of a match, and then voices speaking in muffled tones. She would not disobey her husband, even now, by leaving the room; but, in the intensity of her curiosity, she lay down with her ear to the floor, and listened. She could hear nothing that was said, only that for the most part it was John that was the speaker, while the other man

put in occasionally what sounded like a curt sentence, and now and then he laughed.

Perhaps it was the time and circumstance making it anomalous and out of place, but this laugh had a peculiar significance for her, a sort of weird malice ; it seemed scoffing, incredulous, and cruel. It was never echoed by her husband ; but whenever it occurred there was a pause, and then his quiet tones were heard, it seemed to her, in expostulation.

The clock on the stairs had struck twice while they were thus engaged (though so rapt had she been in what was going on that she had not taken note of the particular hour), and had given warning for doing so the third time, when, after a longer pause in the talk than usual, she heard her husband come softly up the stairs. She knew it was he by his footfall, else she would not have known his voice when he addressed her.

"Hist, hist!" said he ; "not a word above your breath. Where are you, Maggie?"

"I am here," answered she softly. "I put out the light, because"——

"You were right," answered he quickly. "No matter why—ask no questions ; and if you can find what I require without a candle, do so. The bottle of terminable ink is not in the parlour, can you give it me?"

Maggie's sense of order was acute ; without that fidgetiness which insists upon every article being "in its proper place," and is the curse of comfort, she knew where everything in her own house was to be found.

"I used that bottle in experiments ; but there is a new one in the cupboard, calculated for a shorter time"—she was already passing her hand along a shelf of it, in swift but cautious search, as a child catches a fly. "Yes here it is!"

"Did the experiment succeed?"

"Perfectly: the sheet of paper on which the words were written became blank at the very hour to which they were computed. This is calculated for but one week exactly."

As their hands met in the darkness, and her husband took the bottle she held out, he drew her towards him, pressed her to his heart, and imprinted upon her forehead a kiss so long and loving that it might have been one of farewell. Then, heaving a deep sigh, he turned, and took his way, as silently as he had come, back to his unknown companion.

CHAPTER XXV.

GROWN OLD.

WOMEN are born watchers ; their patient and unselfish nature fits them to be the companions of Sickness and of Pain through the long hours of the pitiless night, and Maggie was no novice in that noble sisterhood ; but her watch this night was of a far different sort from those she had passed by her sick father's bed ; there had been anxiety in them, but in this case there was, besides a weird and nameless terror, a devouring curiosity, which, nevertheless, she feared to gratify a mysterious dread, like that entertained for some ghostly visitor, except that it did not vanish with the dawn.

The awful night had been, as it were, divided into two scenes, if such they could be called, wherein scarce aught had been visible to her outward eyes ; with one brief interval between them, almost as appalling as themselves, during which her husband had come up to her with his strange request, but without one word of explanation or of comfort. He had afterwards remained below stairs fully as long as he had done at first, during which the same muffled talk had gone on, though not so continuously as before. One of the two seemed to be writing, and the other suggesting or objecting. Then a chair was pushed away from the table, a word or two spoken with emphasis, but not so loud that she could catch its meaning, and their long clandestine interview had come to an end. There was no good-bye nor word of parting

between those two, as her husband let the stranger out at the front door. Whether the latter was a thief or not, Maggie felt that they were deadly enemies. Her instincts, always keen and delicate, were wrought to their utmost pitch, and attained truths beyond the reach of logic. Before her husband had returned she took care to seek her pillow, and affect the slumber which he would be well aware could not be real. She yearned to ask a score of questions, but she would not pain him by asking one. He would be sure to tell her if it was well for him to tell; but he had said, "Ask no questions," on his late brief visit, in such a voice as was not to be gainsaid, and which had seemed to appeal even more than to command. If she had loved him more, or perhaps if he had loved her less, if he had given her no such overwhelming proofs of his devotion to herself, she might have insisted upon sharing his secret, since he and she were one. But she felt that there had been no such justification in her case, and therefore her generous heart paid him the tribute of silence. Nevertheless, it was a grievous tax. He had returned as before without a light, and sought his couch without a word. They had lain side by side for hours, each broad awake, and each aware that the other was so, and both occupied with the same subject, to one an engrossing fact, to the other as engrossing a speculation. To Maggie every moment intensified the mystery, and deepened the horror of it. Suppose he should never tell her! Would it be possible, she wondered, to share bed and board with him for her whole life long, under such circumstances? Men had kept secrets from their wives before, but surely not secrets that the one possessed and the other half-possessed, and of which, he must needs know, she had a passionate desire to obtain the full possession.

Some pretence of mutual ignorance was absolutely necessary for domestic concord, and here there could be no pretence. She resolved to submit; but she felt that submission, both

in its pain and in its self-denial, would be little short of martyrdom.

Her husband's persistent silence would be equivalent to a continuous expression of his want of confidence in her prudence or her love. She could not persuade herself to grant that, in this case, he might be correct in his judgment, though in all others she acknowledged its superiority to her own. True, it was not likely that what had occurred that night would for ever remain a mystery; but the satisfaction of discovering it for herself, or of having it disclosed to her by another, would be small indeed as compared with its revelation from his own lips. Yet why should he ever tell her, if not now? If not now, while they were alone together in darkness and silence, immediately after the event itself had happened, and while he could not but be aware that her curiosity was burning to be gratified, though her tongue was dumb. Every moment of mutual silence put explanation farther and farther away. Her reticence had already been accepted by him—doubtless, with gratitude, and with the full sense of the self-sacrifice it had cost her—and it was like taking back a gift to importune him now. There was but one chance of the veil being lifted: perhaps, through all those hours, he was debating with himself how best to break to her some terrible news—for that was the shape the thing had taken with her by this time—and was waiting for daylight to mitigate its horror.

But the night passed, and the dawn broke, without one word from him. She saw it steal in at the uncurtained pane—for she had forgotten to draw the blind when she reclosed the window—and flood the room with its cold light; but he still lay beside her without a sound, without a breath. Was it possible that he was dead? She had heard of people affected by unsuspected heart-disease who had perished in that manner, after some agitation or excitement. This

thought, at first one of those ghastly notions that flit at times across even well-balanced minds, began to grow upon her until it had attained a grim reality. In fear and trembling, she raised herself upon her elbow, and turned to look at him—then uttered a piteous cry.

He opened his eyes, and drowsily demanded what was the matter.

"I have had a dreadful dream," she said, "and was frightened."

She was frightened still, to judge by her wild looks; but he took no notice of them.

"It is still early, is it not, dear?"

"Yes; still early."

She had sunk back upon the pillow, glad to lose sight of him. His long brown hair had turned white! She had heard of such changes following on some terrible shock, and credited them, as one credits miracles; but a miracle that happens under one's own eyes is astounding, for all that. At the first glance she had absolutely believed him to be another person. Had he been conscious of the change when he had come up to her room last night without a candle? No. He had done that for the same reason that he had bidden her be silent—to lead his companion below-stairs to imagine that no other person in the house save him was cognisant of his presence. She had thought out all that hours ago. Besides, if he knew it, he must needs have spoken of it, when his eyes met hers: this was no secret that he could hide from her, or from anybody; though it made that other secret, which he would not tell, ten times more terrible.

Had he seen his brother Richard's ghost?

It had seemed awhile ago that nothing could have exceeded for her the horrors of the previous night; but the morning—the morning that is said to bring joy to the sorrowful and confidence to the terror-stricken—had only brought her a worse

thing! Above-stairs she heard the servant stirring, and in the road without, the wheels of the market-carts going into town: all the life and motion of the day were beginning, but not for her. She had often pictured to herself, when her father was ill, how sad it had been for him to lie powerless upon his bed the long day through, and sigh in vain to be at his work, while others laboured around him! But now she felt herself in worse case even than that. She might go about her usual avocations, but they would have no power to win her thoughts from this intolerable mystery whereof her husband kept the key. She could not help the intrusion of these reflections, but she did her best to drive them back; and in a measure she succeeded. Selfish and querulous as they were, their very presence, and the justification of it, suggested their own cure. If she was thus troubled by her ignorance of what had happened, what must her husband be by his knowledge of it, which had thus brought upon him a sudden and premature old age! She took courage to look round at him again, not furtively, as before, but making him aware that she was about to do so: she knew that he would drop his eyelids, and feign slumber; and he did so. How noble and handsome he looked—but the beauty of his face was no longer that of a statue; it resembled rather that of a corpse! Not only had the hue of health departed from it, but the features were pinched and sharp, the cheeks sunk and worn, as with long illness, the hollows beneath the eyelids dark, though lustrous; only a half-stifed sigh proclaimed that the pain was not over yet. It was his hair, however, that most attracted her attention; it had not turned white, as she had at first imagined: the cold light of the dawn had intensified its transformation; but without doubt it had changed to grey—not a thread here and there, as is often seen, even in very young men—but altogether. The alteration could not escape the notice even of the least observant; to conceal it was im-

possible, and it would be absolutely necessary to account for it. Could she persuade him to stay in bed and feign illness, so that she might tend him for a time, alone, and then give out that pain of body, not of mind, had changed him so? It was a poor and shallow device enough, but, since no other chance presented itself, it seemed feasible.

"John, dear!" said she softly.

"I hear you," answered he, in as low a tone, but freighted with no tenderness, as hers was; not that it was unkind, but to her sensitive ear it suggested indifference—the knowledge that the worst has happened that can happen, and that there is no remedy—the indifference of despair. "What is it, Maggie?"

"I wish to ask a favour of you."

A piteous moan broke from his lips.

"It is no question, John," continued she hastily. "Do not fear that I shall ask what it may pain you to reply to. If it is your good pleasure to be silent upon what occurred last night, I shall respect your silence. I need not tell you my own wishes upon that subject, for you must know them. It is something—and I thank you for it—that you do not attempt to deceive me. You shall keep your secret—if needs must." Here her hand sought his, as though in ratification of that promise, and he carried it to his lips and kissed it—so cagerly, that if he had been her slave, and she some eastern tyrant who had granted to him, unasked, his forfeit life, he could not have shown a more reverent, nay, abject gratitude. "The favour I would beg of you, John, is simply that you will keep your bed this morning, or at least your room"—

"It is impossible!" interrupted he, in a hoarse whisper; "I dare not!"

"Dare not? Then there is danger in this matter, as I feared," thought Maggie. "He has been overpowered by villains, and only had his life spared upon condition that he

should not breathe a word of their presence here last night. He has promised to go about his usual business, and comport himself in all things as though no such outrage had occurred. A wild and improbable idea, as she recognised it to be, even while she entertained it, but was not every circumstance about her become wild and dreamlike? That John had not asked the reason of her singular request was itself astounding, and only explicable on the ground that things much more singular as well as serious were filling his mind.

"Is it for fear of calling attention to what happened last night, John! I am asking for your own sake, be sure of that," added Maggie hastily, for a look of piteous pleading crossed his face, as though he would have reminded her of her promise,—"that you would get up"—

"Yes, yes; I must get up," interrupted he, like one talking to himself; "I must go to office; there must be nothing different to-day from what was yesterday."

"But there *is* something different, John—something very, very different."

She hesitated to tell him what had happened to him. An absurd story, that had once made her laugh at some old man, a friend of her father's, who had taken to a Welsh wig, came into her mind: how everybody had stared, and jibed at him, and made him miserable, till at last he threw it into the fire, and went back to his grey hairs again.

"Different?" whispered her husband, holding his hands before him, and regarding them with great interest—an action which she had somewhere seen before. "I see nothing."

"It is not in your hands, John, dear; it is in your face—your hair, that has turned grey."

She had risen and brought a hand-glass, that he might convince himself of the truth of her statement; but he did not even look at it.

"Grey, am I?" said he. The simple faith with which he

accepted the astounding fact, since her words had spoken it, went to Maggie's heart. "Well, I am no worse for that. It proves nothing."

"Nay, dear, but it must needs excite attention—comment, and you know what a gossip Mrs Morden is. My notion is, that you should keep your room, and affect some sharp illness, so that the change should not seem so sudden, nor excite such wonder. If I could only get you away from Rosebank without being seen, then, after a week or two"——

"Leave Rosebank?" exclaimed he vehemently, and rising from the pillow into a sitting posture, as though moved by an electric shock. "That would be madness."

"I know you have always an objection to leave home," continued Maggie quietly, and purposely ignoring his excitement; "and if that is insurmountable, the next best thing you can do is to feign illness in your own room. I will give orders to Mrs Morden that you are not to be disturbed, and will bring up your meals myself."

This arrangement of Maggie's was not so much agreed to by her husband as tacitly acquiesced in. Important as it evidently was, in his eyes, to keep matters quiet, and all things in their usual track, the plan to effect it had apparently no interest with him, while the singular transformation that had necessitated it seemed scarcely to have awakened his surprise. He lay mostly with closed eyes, as though the growing light annoyed them, without movement, and, unless addressed, in silence; while Maggie proceeded with her toilet, herself full of anxious thought. The necessity for action, however, brought her some relief; she had to make up her mind what to say to the housekeeper, and what to her father, regarding John's pretended illness, that should suggest its being serious, and at the same time exclude their presence from his bedside. To pronounce it to be contagious would, in their case, she well knew, be no prohibition; and, moreover, it would neces-

sitate calling in a doctor. She knew of no complaint—and, indeed, perhaps there was none—the effect of which was to “age” its victim, as last night’s events had worked with John.

As she left the room, she stooped down unsought and kissed his forehead, an action rare with her, and which, yesterday, would have evoked his tenderest smile. He looked up, and tried to smile, as she had seen her father do during his late illness : the very muscles, as in his case, seemed to refuse their office. But her husband’s eyes told a different tale—it was not physical paralysis that forbade his smiling, but the burden of an intolerable woe that weighed him down, and which he would not suffer her to share. If she had been Richard’s wife, she would have fallen on her knees, and besought his confidence, certain that, no matter what his gloom, she had the gift to brighten it ; it might have been shame, or even crime, and yet she would not have despaired of giving him comfort ; but in John’s case, though there could be neither shame nor crime, she was doubtful of her powers. She could do only her loving duty to him, as best she might, another way.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DARK, WITHOUT DAWN.

As bent to keep what she knew of her husband's secret, as resolved not to question him upon that portion of it which she knew not, Maggie was careful to let fall no hint to Mrs Morden of having been disturbed upon the previous night. The housekeeper's first remark, when she was told that John was ill, was : "La ! then Lucy was right, after all, when she woke me up with saying she was sure that somebody was moving about in the parlour. It was master, I suppose, after the brandy !" Maggie was about to assent when she was saved from the exposure of her own deceit by the old woman's garrulousness.

"But, lor' bless me, where are my wits gone to ! I was thinking of the old master's time, when there was always a bottle of brandy in the cupboard. I forgot Master John was a teetotaler, and had bricked up the cellar."

"Yes ; but he was in the parlour, for all that," observed Maggie quietly : "he found he couldn't sleep, and so went downstairs, and took up a book, to pass the time."

"Ay, and so caught cold, I'll warrant !" exclaimed the old woman scornfully ; "a thing Mr Thurle never did in all his life. That's what comes of studying, as you might say, out of hours. And now I daresay he's feverish ; and if he gets low, as is like enough, and wants support, how is he to get it, having taken that foolish pledge ?"

It was a habit of the old woman to complain of John, and to contrast him disadvantageously with his brother, and even with his late uncle ; but she had nevertheless a hearty respect and regard for her master, and was very urgent to be allowed to nurse him. Maggie, however, was resolute ; nor could Mrs Morden advance the argument commonly used against young mistresses in such cases, that she knew nothing about sick-beds ; her experience in tending her father gave her a stand-point from which she could not be pushed. So John lay in bed upstairs whilst Maggie tidied the room and lit the fire with her own hands, and when she left him, heard the door locked behind her, and felt that he was safe from intrusion. There were "alarms and excursions" from the kitchen, which gave her some apprehensions ; once Mrs Morden came to her with a solemn face to confide to her what Lucy had hitherto forborne to tell, out of consideration for the trouble about master, that she had found the front door unlocked that morning, which she (Mrs Morden) would take her Bible oath she had securely fastened the last thing before retiring for the night. This Maggie explained by saying that her husband, in his restlessness during the small-hours, had opened the door, to see what sort of weather it was, and had forgotten to turn the key. Another statement, which she found more difficult to meet, was, that the wood in the tool-house had been meddled with ; not diminished in bulk, so far as could be ascertained, but, as it were, restacked, and placed in a new position. As Mrs Morden, however, had no cognisance of this matter, and was jealous of "that chit Lucy's" (as she called her) exclusive information upon any topic, she rather sided with her mistress in pooh-poohing this piece of news, and ascribing it to the girl's fancy. Upon the matter which Maggie expected every moment to be broached, and for which she would have had no sort of explanation, had it been so— as to some signs of excavation over the cellar at the back of

the house—not one word was uttered ; and after hours had passed without any mention of it, curiosity impelled her to go out and examine the spot. What she expected to find was either a great hole dug in the lawn, or traces of such having been recently filled in. But the turf was as smooth and clean thereabouts as elsewhere, and had evidently not been touched by the spade for months. This was a link in the chain of last night's mystery as inexplicable as all the rest ; for that the sounds she had heard had been those of pick and spade, and that they had proceeded from beneath the parlour, where the cellar was situated, she had felt morally certain. This, however, was now proved to be a physical impossibility ; nobody could have been breaking into the cellar at all ; it was no thief with whom her husband had held that interview for so many hours ; and yet, if no thief, what possible business could he have had at such a time within the grounds of Rosebank ?

Above all, who was he ? With every wish to respect her husband's secret, it was not in human nature to refrain from asking herself this question, and endeavouring to frame a reply to it. The appearance of the mysterious visitor, as seen from her window, had struck her as not wholly unfamiliar ; but his voice, from what she could catch of its curt utterances, she could associate with no person of her acquaintance ; while that hard cynical laugh of his, which still seemed to ring in her ears, had for certain pierced them last night for the first time. It was manifestly something this man had done, or said, or threatened, that had affected her husband in so strange and terrible a fashion ; and if she could but identify him, perhaps her woman's wit could suggest some means by which his influence for evil could be averted, and the mischief be confined within its present limits. All day she racked her brains in vain ; and then, as often happens to baffled memory, an undesigned remark of another gave her the key she sought.

The evening was drawing in, and Maggie was congratulating herself on her day's work : the difficult task of disclosing her husband's illness, and yet of calming her father's fears upon his account, had been accomplished ; with the housekeeper she had succeeded even better, for, indeed, the good old dame had not been so importunate to nurse her master as she had expected—it would have been far different had he been her master Richard ; and above all, Maggie had dropped a hint to both that John's sleeplessness was ageing him in looks. In a day or two she might give out that he was "growing grey," and so by degrees prepare them for the spectacle, the unexpectedness of which was its worst feature. For there was no ghastliness, nor even any striking incongruity, in what had happened to him ; his comeliness, which had always been independent of youth, and indeed had had none of its vivacity and grace, was not impaired by the change of his brown locks to grey, any more than that of some women is impaired by powder in the hair. It was terrible to *her*, because of what had affected it, but it would not be so to those to whom it was accounted for by natural causes. Mrs Morden, too, had unconsciously given her great comfort. "Ageing, you say, ma'am, is he, and with a greyish look ? Well, that is not so strange, for I remember his Uncle Thurle, who was handsome too, in his young days, though you might not have guessed it, grew grey rapidly, when he was not much older than Master John."

"Then the change may not be my fancy, you think," said Maggie, "but that it really is so ?"

"As like as not, ma'am," continued the old dame, delighted to find for once her mistress so willing a listener : "those sort of things run in the blood. Though, indeed, I could never fancy poor Master Richard growing grey, even when it was time he should be so." Here she sighed, and wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron. "I was quite upset this

afternoon with the sight of one as brought the dear fellow to my mind, though in anything but a pleasant way, for who should I see, when I was coming back from the meat-market, walking along the High Street as bold as brass, and rigged out once more, so as those who didn't know him would have called him a gentleman, but that there Mr Dennis Blake ! It was he, in my opinion—and in other people's too, who knew more about him—as was Master Richard's ruin ; and now, I reckon, he has been ruining somebody else, for a year ago he was little better than a beggar, and now again he's like a green bay-tree ! ”

Upon this text the old lady ran for several minutes ; but Maggie heard nothing of her improving discourse, nay, saw nothing but a slouching figure clothed in rags following her husband through the midnight gloom into his own house, and whom she now recognised for the first time.

It was no wonder that her unassisted memory had failed to do so, for the link of association had been wanting : the very last person in all the world whom she could have expected to see in John Milbank's company—alone, too, and, as it seemed, upon confidential terms—was Dennis Blake. Yet that that was the man whom his own hands had admitted into the house, and with whom he had sat for hours in rapt converse, she had now no doubt.

Long after Mrs Morden had left her, she sat alone in the very room in which that strange interview had taken place, striving to picture it to herself—John at the table writing, and Blake standing or sitting near him, with his evil face and mocking laugh—and wondering what two such men could have in common. Depths of her nature were stirred, of the very existence of which she had been hitherto unconscious ; prejudices, and even hates, were laid bare, which the waters of oblivion had long covered. For the first time since her marriage, she felt a vague mistrust of her husband's char-

acter : how *could* a good and honest man hold intercourse with so depraved and infamous a wretch as he? nay, whom she more than suspected to be the murderer of Richard Milbank. She recalled to her recollection how John had defended this man when she had made that charge, and caused her to abandon it and almost withdraw it, even in thought ; but it recurred to her now with terrific force. Suppose John knew that he had done the deed and was shielding him !

She sprang from her chair, and swept her hair back from her burning forehead. Was she going mad, that such an idea could enter into her mind with respect to her own husband ? a man so honest, good and pure, that his virtues were resented by a wicked world, and positively rendered him unpopular : a man who had shown himself, too, so excellent a brother to poor Richard, and who, for his sake—or for hers, it was no matter—had actually inflicted punishment in public upon this very Blake with his own hands. After such an occurrence, not to mention all the enmities between them that had gone before, and of which she had vaguely heard, friends they could never be ; that was impossible ; but they might be allies, bound to one another by some unhallowed league. Men of the most widely different characters, and who could never sympathise with one another, had yet been known to plot together for a common object.

But what could the object be in this case, and why should she be thinking of plots in connection with John Milbank, of all human creatures ? Thus she stood, her mind tossed this way and that, now by wild suspicions, now by passionate self-reproach, and unable to arrive at any conclusion. People had pitied her for the dull, sing-song life that she lived at Rosebank, albeit, as they owned, with “The Best of Husbands ;” but here was a mystery that had removed it far enough from the regions of commonplace. Suppose, too, the

gossips should be wrong in the other particular—that is, as to John's goodness. But no; that was incredible: absolutely impossible with respect to him as a husband—for his devotion and tenderness had stood the test of years, and were undiminished; and incredible as regarded his general character. She would have dutiful trust in him still; she would hope that, somehow or other, in Heaven's good time, this dark cloud, though it could never be forgotten, might dissolve under some blessed beam of truth, which should show him as pure as ever: but all the time a haunting voice grimly whispered that she was hoping against hope; that this mystery would never be discovered, or, if it were, would disclose some facts more terrible than suggestion could hint at. To escape from it she fled upstairs. In the society of her husband, while she looked in his noble face, while she listened to his tender words, surely, surely she could entertain no doubts, no misgivings of him!

Somewhat to her surprise she found that although it was early (for he had been up during the day, and apparently occupying himself with business matters at a desk which she had extemporised for him), he had already retired to bed, and was lying with his face to the wall, and evidently inclined for silence, if not for slumber. This was a disappointment to her, since it denied her the moral support of which she stood in need; but with her usual acquiescence in his wishes—or in what she deemed to be so—she forbore to address him, and herself retired for the night. For some time she lay awake, thought hurrying after thought, like sunless clouds before the wind; but presently, overcome with the fatigues and anxieties of the last two nights, she fell into a deep sleep.

About midnight, as she learnt from the clock upon the stairs, she wakened, but lay very still and quiet, partly for fear of disturbing her husband—if by chance his brain should have at last found repose—and partly because she felt this wake-

fulness was growing to be a habit with her, and not to be encouraged. Events might occur, to meet which she might require all her strength of mind and body, and sleeplessness was the weakener of both. So she lay with closed eyes, resolute not to move, and, if possible, not to think, yet with all her senses in a state of sharp and painful tension. At first, not a sound was to be heard—not even the breathing of her husband by her side, a circumstance which did not surprise her: if he were not asleep, he would now take no pains to pretend to be so, believing herself to be sunk in slumber; but presently she heard the muffled tread of feet in the room beneath. Always sensible and slow to give way to fancy, she for the moment ascribed this to nervousness; she knew that her nerves were in a morbid state, and was disinclined to credit her own impressions; but after a while she became convinced that her ears were not deceiving her. Then the idea which she had done her best to shut from her mind rushed in, and took possession of it in an instant. These were the footsteps of Dennis Blake: he had come to-night, as he had come last night, and as he might continue to come, she knew not how long, to hold secret converse with her husband! She felt an anger in her breast that would not be stifled. She had given her word not to ask John questions about the previous interview; but that was when she was in ignorance of who had been his companion; if she had dreamt that it had been Dennis Blake, she would have insisted upon an explanation. Supposing, even, that he were innocent of the heinous crime of which she suspected him, still, since she *did* suspect him, and her husband knew it, how could he admit this man to their own roof-tree? She put aside the consideration of his offences against herself, although they were surely such as should have closed a husband's door against him, and rested her case upon the former ground alone. It was indecent—it was insulting to her own judg-

ment, knowing her opinion of the man to be what it was, that John should suffer him within their doors. Upon the first occasion it might be pardoned, since Blake had thrust himself within them—aided, doubtless, by powerful, though to her, unknown forces, and quite unexpectedly ; but nothing could excuse this second visit. She was a dutiful wife, but duty did not call upon her to submit to this ; to harbour in the very house that had been Richard's home the wretch she knew to have been accessory to his ruin, and suspected of being privy to his death !

The noise continued, and even louder than before, a shuffling and muffled noise, apparently of moving feet. It seemed to her as though the person below-stairs, having somehow gained admission to the house, was endeavouring to draw John's attention to the fact of his presence, without arousing any of the other inmates. But to attribute motives to sounds is even easier than to attribute them to actions.

"John, John !" cried she, in such a tone as she had never addressed to him before, "there is some one moving in the parlour, and I believe it to be that hateful villain, Dennis Blake !"

The die was cast—she had told him that she was in possession of half his secret ; and, notwithstanding her indignation, she felt some feeling of alarm at her own audacity, not for herself, but for fear of its consequences to him. He answered not a syllable. Had her words stricken him dumb ? Had this fruit of the tree of knowledge, which she had plucked, brought death to him ?

"John, John !" cried she again, but this time with nervous terror—"for Heaven's sake, speak !" But there was no reply. She reached forth her hand to seize his shoulder, but it only fell upon his vacant pillow. Her husband was not beside her—she was alone !

CHAPTER XXVII.

PARTING.

FOR the moment the conviction that she was alone flashed upon Maggie with a sense of desertion : John had left her, and below-stairs was Dennis Blake !

Her mind was so occupied with suggestions and suspicions of this man, that every thought reverted to him ; and it was not until after some reflection that the more natural explanation occurred to her, that the person moving in the parlour was John himself. What if the servants should be awake, and hear him, as she herself had done, and come downstairs ? In that case, all her precautions of the previous day would be thrown away ! It was clearly her duty to warn him. Rising hastily, and wrapping her dressing-gown around her, she softly opened the door. His movements could still be heard, but, curiously enough, they were not so audible as when she was in her room. She went down the stairs a little way, and then paused to listen. It was very dark, yet not so dark before her as behind her ; a greyish glimmer, such as steals through windows even in a murky night, was before her, and showed that the door of the parlour was open. If any one was there, she must, therefore, needs hear him, almost to his very breathing. And whoever was there must have heard *her*. The tick of the clock on the landing, the chirrup of a cricket in the kitchen, smote upon her straining ears, but no other sound. Then arose a shuffling, muffled noise—as of one who

drags a burden behind him—from beneath her very feet ; the person moving was in the cellar !

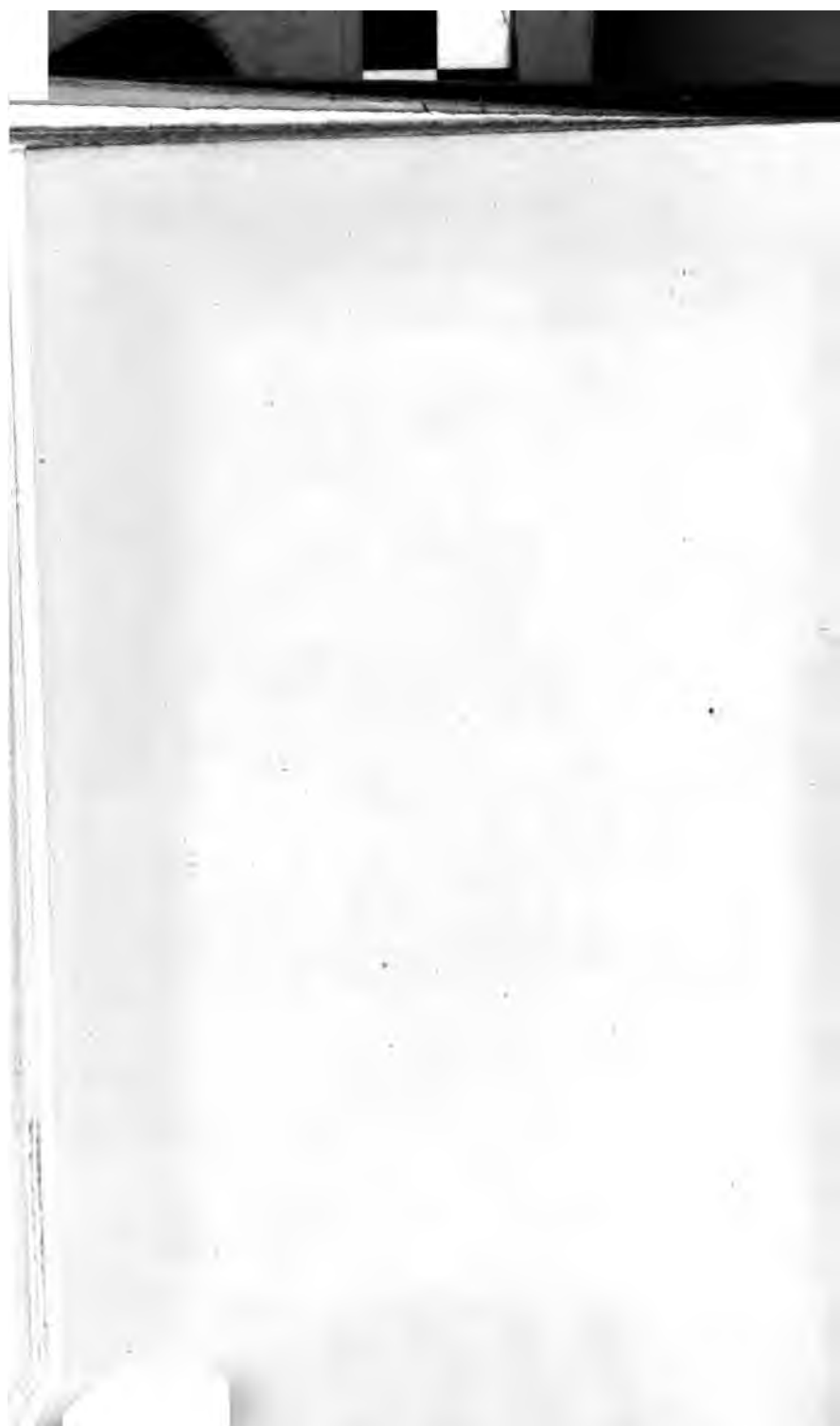
And here was a new mystery, for how could the cellar have been reached, since no one had dug into it from without the house, and the wall that had been bricked over the door shut it off from all within ! The noise continued for a few moments, then grew fainter and fainter, and all was still again, save for the clock and the cricket. To go on without a lighted candle was beyond Maggie's courage ; but having returned to her room and procured one, she ventured to explore the parlour. It was empty, as she now expected it to be ; and so were all the rooms on the basement floor. The front door was unfastened, so that it was certain her husband had left the house. She pushed back one of the bolts, a safeguard her terrors compelled her to take, and sat down to await his return. It was her purpose, when he did so, to demand an explanation of all that had happened during the last eight-and-forty hours. She felt that her powers were not equal to the task she had imposed upon them. Her position in that house had become insupportable ; she must speak or she must die. Her past life, with the exception of her ill-starred passion for Richard, had been very uneventful ; her lines had fallen on the broad road pursued by other persons in her condition, with undulations, but without great heights or depths ; and her father, notwithstanding he was by nature reticent, had had no secrets from her. These circumstances of mystery, therefore, with which she now found herself surrounded, were the more insufferable and overwhelming. An hour had dragged its slow length along, and her solitary vigil still continued, every minute of which helped to fix her resolve to know the worst from her husband's lips. She had a right to know it, since the trouble that had changed him from young to old was now consuming *her*. Suppose he should never come, but should disappear, as Richard had done



before him ! She felt that to lose her husband would have been endurable, but not to lose him thus, with his secret unrevealed. She was shocked to think that she could entertain such thoughts ; but she was no longer mistress of herself and responsible for them. And still he came not. She once more unfastened the door, and looked forth into the wintry night : it was dark and windless, as the last two nights had been, and snow was falling ; but it was not starless. There was one star, very low down in the sky, and this star was moving and coming towards her. It was a light borne by some one coming from the direction of the little wood in which was the quarry. She had little doubt that this person was her husband ; but an inextinguishable curiosity had taken possession of her, and conquered all her fears. She had closed the door of the parlour, and left the candle there, so that it was invisible from without, and she could watch, herself unseen. The light was drawing nearer, yet not immediately towards her, but in the direction of the tool-house ; that spot which had already excited the servants' superstitious terrors, and her own suspicions. With a sudden impulse she sprang forward on to the lawn, and made for the moving light. Her footsteps could approach quite close to him who bore it, unperceived, if she could but reach him before he gained the gravel. Once she stumbled over a flower-bed, and once against a rose-tree, but her knowledge of the ground enabled her to move quickly enough to effect her object. She was able to recognise her husband, bearing, besides his lantern, a spade and pickaxe ; his features she could not perceive, but he was plodding on, with head depressed, like one who is weary with toil. He crossed the path that lay between the lawn and the tool-house, where she heard him throw down his burden ; and then all was dark. He had extinguished the lantern, and was, doubtless, about to return within doors. Maggie flew back as swiftly as she had come, but, in her confusion, missed



"She was able to recognise her husband, bearing, besides his lantern, a spade and pickaxe."—p. 224



her way, and had but just time to reach the parlour before she heard him stealthily open the front-door. In the lobby, he stood for a few moments, apparently to satisfy himself that no one was stirring, for when he entered the room he had not disencumbered himself of his hat and cloak.

At the sight of his wife standing before him with her questioning face, white with cold and eagerness, he stopped, and stared.

"Why, Maggie, what is the meaning of this?"

"Nay, John, it is you who must answer me that question," was her stern reply.

"You told me you would ask none of me."

"That was as respected the doings of last night. It is not in human nature to be silent for ever, while such strange things are happening under one's roof."

"They will happen no more, Maggie," said he, with piteous entreaty. "The worst *has* happened, and is over. Be content."

Content! How was it possible for her to be so, with that spectre, wan and worn, before her; his grey hair only one item in the woeful change that had befallen him, haggard, terror-stricken, exhausted, the mere shadow of the man he had been, even but yesterday!

"I am your wife, John, and I claim to know what takes you from my side in a night like this"—

"You are not jealous, Maggie, surely?" interrupted he, with a palsied smile, and grasping at the framework of the door in which he stood.

"Jealous! Yes, jealous of your secret; jealous of the villain whom you admitted here last night, and who has had the power to blast you, as the lightning blasts the tree, to blight the flower of manhood that you were, to *this*;" here she pointed at him with a disdainful finger. "Tell me all. Though *you* are afraid of him, *I* am bold enough to meet a wretch like that, and to defy him to his face."

"Have you seen him?" whispered her husband hoarsely. "Has he told you anything?"

"He has told me nothing. I would not listen to him if he proposed to tell."

"That's right," returned the other, in the same low tone. "He was ever incapable of truth, a liar born: remember that. Oh, if I had but killed him on that first day when he defiled your name with his base lips!"

"Killed him!" echoed Maggie, in horrified accents. Why had John finished that last sentence with such a look of unutterable despair? An old story cropped up in her mind, that had been sown there in her nursery days, about a man who, having resolved to kill another, had gone out with spade and pickaxe, just as her husband had done that very night, and dug his grave beforehand. "If you have thought of killing him, it is no wonder you should look as you do, for you are a murderer in heart already, though the blood of your victim may not yet be upon your hands."

"Upon my hands," repeated her husband, looking at them mournfully, and with the same action that she had observed in him upon the previous night, and which she now identified with that of an actress whom she had seen years ago. Her father had taken her to the theatre as a child, a most unaccustomed treat, for play-going was looked upon by him in general with disfavour; but the scene recurred to her now, as though it had been yesterday, and even the woman's words: "*What, will these hands ne'er be clean?*" They smote upon her ear with the same dread significance with which they had smitten them then.

"I say, John, if you are thinking of murder, you have stained your soul with it, though not your hands! Do you suppose that any craft or subtlety of yours would hide it, if once committed! Or if ever you secured impunity from the law, that you would seem a guiltless man to *me*?" She

spoke with uncommon fervour, for the idea which had taken possession of her mind was strangely strengthened and corroborated by her husband's shrinking form and ghastly face.

"I am no murderer," gasped he, looking doggedly down.

"That is, not *yet*," returned she, impetuously. "Or perhaps you think that killing a man—supposing you hate him enough, or that he deserves it in your eyes—is no murder! But I tell you, if you slay Dennis Blake, I will abjure you as though you had slain my father; nay, if he was to disappear, as your brother Richard has done, and none knew whither he had gone, I should credit you with having destroyed him; and if you owned to that, but pleaded that it was a fair fight, or that the blow that slew him was accidental, I would not believe you!"

"She would not believe me," murmured John dejectedly.

"No, I would not. If you took a man's life at all, even though it was this man's, I would be your wife no longer. I should shrink from you as from some loathsome thing. I swear it!"

Perhaps she really felt what she said; perhaps she used such force and energy of speech to make him believe she meant it, and so to dissuade him from the crime which she was convinced he meditated. The effect of these words upon her husband was, however, prodigious, and far beyond anything on which she could have calculated: he staggered to a chair and sat down—his eyes staring at her with mute despair, and his jaw sunk down upon his breast—the very image of remorseful woe and guilt.

"Great Heaven!" cried she, "is it possible that you have already killed him? John! John! do say that you have not done that. You have not surely dared to take his life, unjudged by man?"

"I have not," he murmured.

"Thank God for that! Forgive me, husband, for having

deemed you guilty of so base a crime." She sprang towards him, in the fulness of her great relief, and would have clasped him to her breast ; but he put out his hand, and stopped her.

"Do not touch me !" said he bitterly, and with averted face, "or you will repent it."

"Why should I, husband, since you tell me you are innocent ?"

"What matters, if you will not believe me ; if, for all I can say or swear, I am still a loathsome thing ?"

"I spoke in haste, John, and in fear. Oh, pardon me ! I knew you never could have done so dark a deed. It was yourself, your face, your tones, that made me dream a ghastly dream ; I have awakened now. Tell me but this, and I will ask no more, but shall be satisfied : What took you out to-night ?"

"What took me out to-night ?" he echoed in hollow tones.

"Yes. Tell me the truth, as you have ever done. Hide nothing from me. Indeed, indeed, it will be best for us !"

He groaned, and shook his head.

"It will ; I am sure it will ! If I knew nothing, then, perhaps, I could bear your silence ; but I do know something."

"What is it that you know ?"

"No matter. Tell me all, and then, from what I know, I shall judge whether you are telling me the truth.—No ; I will not mistrust you, John," added she impetuously ; "I saw your lantern as you crossed the lawn, and followed you."

"Followed me !" cried he, rising suddenly from his chair.

"Oh no ; that is impossible !"

"I followed you, not out, but home, John. I went to meet you as you came from the wood ; you had a pickaxe and a spade with you."

He shuddered, and drew back from her towards the door.

"Well, what then ?"

"I ask you to tell me why you had those tools, though I fear that I can guess."

He answered nothing, but stood staring at her, and wetting his parched lips.

"Were they not to dig a grave with?"

- He uttered a low piteous cry, and hid his face.

"It was meant for Dennis Blake," continued she quietly. "I know it. I have told your secret to yourself, since you would not tell it to me. The other way would have been the better, John. However, let us be thankful that your guilt has stopped at the intention. Do not reproach yourself so cruelly: the evil that this man has done to you must have been great indeed; and, as it is, you have only wished him dead, as men wish their own brothers every day. When I said just now that to do that was to be a murderer, I knew not what I said; I spoke, as women do, in thoughtless passion: do not lay my bitter words to heart so."

Once more she approached him, and would have taken his hand, but he snatched it from her.

"Touch me not!" he said; "I tell you, I am not fit to touch!"

"But you have repented, surely: and repentance washes away sin, even in the eyes of Heaven; how much more, then, in sinful eyes like mine."

"Repented!" murmured he, in a shuddering voice. "Yes, I have repented, but not enough!"

She judged from his wild words that he wished to be alone, that he might make his peace with Heaven.

"I will leave you, John, for a little; and when you see me next you shall not be troubled by any questioning. From henceforth, mistrust is over. I will have firm faith in you till it shall be your pleasure to have faith in me."

"Firm faith," sighed he, looking at her with sorrowful pity: "indeed, you will need it all. I had hopes, until to-night,

that it might not be tried, but I was a fond fool to entertain them. Your own words have scattered them to the winds."

"My words, John! How can that be?"

"No matter; you will learn soon enough," was his strange rejoinder. "You said that you would leave me for a little here alone. Do so!" Then, as she was about to quit the room: "Good-bye, dear Maggie, good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" echoed she, surprised. "Why, you are not going out again to-night?"

"No—no," answered he, so slowly and so mournfully that each monosyllable sounded like the muffled boom of a death-bell; his air, too, was so sombre and so hopeless that a sudden conviction flashed upon her that he was contemplating suicide. "You will not do a mischief to yourself, John, surely; promise me that."

"How well she reads my thoughts," murmured he, as though to himself: "she must almost love me!"

"I do love you, John—not almost, but with all my heart! Is it possible that you could be so cruel as to wish to kill yourself, and leave me desolate? You did—you do! I see it in your face! I will not leave this room, nor you, till I have your promise. Swear to me that you will never raise your hand, not only against another's life, but against your own."

"That is a hard command," answered he mournfully; "you will know one day how hard. Nevertheless, I will obey it. Fear not to leave me here, and find me dead. To live shall be a part of the punishment I have deserved for my evil thoughts—not deeds, Maggie," added he, with earnestness; "upon my soul, not deeds!"

"I am sure of that, John," answered she, assuringly; "and even these thoughts, like some baleful fungus that springs up in a single night, arose in you, I know, but yesterday. Pluck them from your bosom; pray for the stainless soul you once

possessed, and I will pray that Heaven may make me worthy to be the wife of such a man !”

Before he could move or prevent her, her quick step had reached him, and she had kissed his forehead, and passed swiftly from the room. His word once passed she knew would never be broken, and she had no more fears as to his personal safety ; but the fact that she had entertained them, and with justice, combined with the previous terrors and anxieties of the night, had shattered her nerves ; she felt unequal to speak with him any further for the present, and longed for solitude, and time to collect her exhausted energies. On her part, she had promised to question him no more as to the mystery that hung about him, and had blanched his hair, and plunged his soul in gloom ; but she could not help questioning herself. What *could* it be that had worked so potently for ill with him in a few hours, and set his innocent and noble nature upon schemes of murder and self-destruction ? He had given them up, he said, and yet he had shrunk from her caress as though it had been pollution—not to him, but her. His haggard, hopeless face was before her still.

Was he standing where she had left him, or was he on his knees invoking pardon for the crimes he had meditated ? He was speaking—doubtless outpouring his soul in prayer. What *could* it be that had driven so good a man to prayers like that ? It seemed a sacrilege to listen. She got into bed, and the warmth was grateful to her shivering limbs. Her weary eyelids craved for rest, but she would not let them fall until John came upstairs. What could she do to help him, not knowing what help he needed, nor against whom ? Only, of one thing could she be certain, that danger menaced him, and she could also guess the quarter from which he looked for it. She would need all her faith in him, John had said ; yet how should he suppose that anything Dennis Blake could say would weigh a feather's weight with her against her husband ? What could

Blake do, or what could any man, against one so armed from head to heel in honesty of purpose as was he?

John was stirring now below : he was at his desk, for she heard him use his key. What could he want there? He kept his Bible in it, for he was scrupulous to keep it hidden, like his own good deeds. Perhaps he was about to seek comfort from the sacred page.

"John, is that you?" There was a knock at the door, to which she had half-consciously replied.

"How is master this morning, ma'am?"

The day had begun to dawn, and Mrs Morden had come to call her. She must have fallen suddenly asleep before John came upstairs.

"He is much the same," answered she mechanically, but the words died away upon her tongue. Her husband was not by her side; for the second time she found herself alone. On the last occasion it had been night, and now it was growing day; yet her alarm had been as nothing compared with her present terror. A conviction was borne in upon her, steadfast as though it had been confirmed by a hundred tongues, that he had left her for ever!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE TUNNEL.

It was curious, and exemplified most powerfully her appreciation of her husband's character, that Maggie did not even now believe that he had broken his word. It would have been only natural, and very pardonable, if, considering what she knew of his intention, her first thought, upon finding that John had not come upstairs, should have been that he was lying in the room beneath, slain by his own hand. Her mind was full of wretched presentiments, but it did not forecast that ghastly picture. She listened, indeed, with throbbing brain and beating heart to the housekeeper's movements below-stairs, but not with the fear that some terrible cry should presently break forth to tell her that John was dead. She thought it probable that he had left some letter behind him (just as Richard had done), and that presently Mrs Morden would come upon it, and bring it to her. He would surely never leave her without one word of explanation, either spoken or written, and thus add the most terrible link of all to the chain of mystery that surrounded her. But when this did not happen, she became consumed with a worse terror. Suppose he had gone forth and met with Dennis Blake, and in some endeavour to conciliate him—for the idea that he had cause to fear that man was fixed in her mind—had fallen into a fresh quarrel, which had had fatal results ! He had passed his word to abstain from violence towards

him, as respected what had already occurred between them ; but some new insult or menace might have proved too much for his patience, and have brought the guilt of blood upon his head. She did not think of that now, as she had done when the crime had been only in contemplation ; if it were indeed committed, she felt that all her compassion would be for him who had wrought the deed, and not for his victim ; that her first and only thought would be to save him from the consequences of his act.

The consequences ! Could imagination conceive anything more terrible than these ? What was slander, of which she had thought so much when that had been all there was to think of ? Nay, what had been even the dissipation of her early dreams of love when matched with *this* ? All human misery was, it now appeared, comparative ; she had fancied that her lines had been sounding its depths, when they had, in fact, been only stirring its surface. If only this hideous suspicion should prove to be unfounded, all other burdens she might have to bear would seem as light as air. If only *this* cloud might pass away, the sky of life would be blue for ever. From her reply to Mrs Morden, her husband's absence would, of course, be unsuspected, and unless he had himself made it known, might be kept concealed for days. Would it be better to conceal it, so as to give him an opportunity for escape ? Or would her doing so fix the guilt of what he might have done upon him ? What excuse could she give for the deception which should not be connected with its cause ? Upon the whole, she judged it best to own that he had left the house, and, at the same time, to exhibit as little concern as was compatible with the circumstances of the case. To make up a story that should explain his absence, was far beyond her powers ; and even if she could do so, how could she withstand the showers of questions that would be poured upon her from all sides ? how deceive with consistency

such keen inquirers as her father and Mr Linch? Nay, would not the constant and persevering interrogations of the gossip housekeeper, though more easily parried, be a still more intolerable infliction. In any case, not a moment was to be lost in making her choice of these miserable alternatives. As the servant girl passed her room door, Maggie put her head out and inquired whether she had seen her master. "He felt better this morning," said she, "as I told Mrs Morden, and insisted upon getting up." It was the first time in her life that Maggie had told a premeditated lie, yet she felt no confusion; the conditions of her being had become exceptional, and her moral perceptions had changed with them; she, in her turn, had become grey at heart in a single half-hour.

"He's not downstairs, ma'am," replied Lucy stolidly: "perhaps he is walking in the garden."

It was not a likely thing for an invalid to do on a winter's morning before breakfast-time, but Maggie felt quite thankful to the girl for her Boeotian suggestion. If every one were as dull and indifferent as she, her future course would not be so set with pitfalls as it was likely to be. It was something, too, to feel that Lucy would go down and break the news to Mrs Morden that John was not within.

The housekeeper, as she expected, at once came hurrying up: "Lor', ma'am, why, the girl tells me as master is up and out, and the snow's a-falling!"

"It is very imprudent, certainly," said Maggie, but in tones so low and stifled, that they must needs have been lost on the old woman.

"Such weather is a'most enough to kill him," continued the excited dame; "why, he surely must have lost his head."

Here was another grain of comfort undesignedly cast before the unhappy Maggie; if this suggestion that John had "lost his head," could be worked out, the worst—that is, the *very*

worst she feared—might yet find some mitigation. At all events, it was a chance that, in her helpless plight, was not to be thrown away.

"He has been very ill and very strange, Mrs Morden," returned she, with emphasis. "I have not been able to make him out at all."

"Lor', he has been light-headed and that, then, has he? Well, now, if I didn't suspect it! Says I to Lucy only last night, 'What can be the reason as missus don't wish me to attend to master, but must needs wait on him herself? I shouldn't wonder if he was a bit delirious.' Not that Master John is one to have secrets to commit himself" (how this random shaft quivered in poor Maggie's heart!), "but that one doesn't like one's own flesh and blood, or the bone of one's bone, at least, which is nigher still, to talk at random before other people. Poor Morden himself used to do it, though that was drink, poor fellow, and it used to vex me most uncommon. But, dear heart, ma'am, if he is gone queer, should we not send out for help at once, lest he should do himself a mischief?"

"No, no; I apprehend nothing of that sort. I will go out and seek for him myself; and, in the meantime, pray say nothing about it to anybody."

Maggie knew she could not have devised a better means of getting it noised abroad that John was *non compos mentis*, than the laying this injunction upon the worthy old lady, who was as incapable of reticence concerning the affairs of those about her as Dame Eleanor Spearing in Hood's ballad. If John should return, it was easy to affect that this attack had been temporary, due to some access of fever; and if he should not return, for the terrible reason that had suggested itself, the law would be tender to him. The very change in his appearance would go a long way to prove his insanity, if it should be necessary to set up that plea. In the shipwreck of her

life, she clung to this poor scheme with feverish persistency, and for the moment it buoyed her up. It had an immediate value, too, since it absolved her from the necessity of explaining anything. Everybody was left by it to form his own conclusions. But in the meantime, some sort of action was demanded of her. She put on her bonnet and shawl, and announced her intention of going in person to Mitchell Street; it was possible, she said, that her husband had gone thither; and at all events, it was only right that she should at once inform her father of what had taken place. So much, at least, was necessary to satisfy the proprieties in the eyes of Mrs Morden; and, upon the whole, it seemed the most natural thing to do in the case suggested; if she had herself suspected John to be deranged, she would not have been satisfied with sending others to look for him. At the same time, Maggie trembled at the notion of leaving home, even for an hour, lest tidings should in the meantime arrive there which might need judicious interpretation. However, she at once set out, though the snow was by this time beginning to fall thickly. At a few paces from home, indeed, the house itself was scarcely visible, and taking advantage of this circumstance, she could not resist entering the tool-house unperceived, upon her way to the gate. It was thence that John had taken his spade and pickaxe, and there they now lay, just within the doorway, where she had seen him throw them down. She had examined the place the day before, but there was a vague attraction about it—though an attraction of repulsion—which still haunted her. It was a bare, common edifice of its kind enough. Empty flower-pots and odds and ends of matting strewed the unpaved floor, and notwithstanding the season, it was pervaded by a smell of mould, as though the gardening operation of "potting" had been but recently carried on in it. This smell was more powerful where the wood was stacked in a huge pile upon the side nearest to the house, and it seemed

to her that the stack did not present the same appearance as it had done yesterday. On closer inspection she felt convinced of this ; and on rolling a log or two away and moving some brushwood, she came upon the cause—a considerable heap of newly-dug-out earth. Exploring further, she discovered an orifice in the floor, communicating with a damp, dark passage, large enough to permit of the entrance of a human body. That was the precise image that her thought suggested, just as if it had been expressed in words : large enough “for a human body ;” and an unspeakable terror took possession of her soul as the idea occurred to her : suppose that hole had been excavated for the very purpose to receive the body of Dennis Blake !

Her limbs seemed to give way beneath her, and she sat down with beating heart upon a huge overturned basket, the only substitute for a seat the place afforded. She had taxed her husband with digging a grave, and he had not denied it. What if the grave were within a few feet of her ! Though she knew that no actual crime had been committed, she felt as though she were actually in the presence of a murdered corpse. The very smell of the earth made her sick and faint. The basket, she now discovered, had been filled with it ; it had evidently been used for carrying out what had been dug from the hole. She examined the spade and pickaxe, and felt quite a relief to find that the soil attaching to them was not of the same kind, and was mixed with gravel. It was not *here*, then, that John had been working last night, but in the little wood or spinney, from which she had seen him coming with the lantern, and which was in the neighbourhood of the gravel-pit. A sudden instinct caused her to smear the flat of the spade and the pick with the earth about her ; the discovery of what had happened here was probably inevitable, but she would leave no hint of what had happened elsewhere. *to what had happened she knew nothing, but she felt she*

was on the verge of some discovery, if only she had the courage to make it. With a silent prayer for strength and mercy, and both for another's sake as well as for her own, Maggie once more approached the excavation. The narrow passage into which it led was not, she now perceived, utterly dark; a grey gleam of light struggled into it from the other end. It ran in a gradual slant towards the house, and more than once she slipped on the damp surface as she felt her way, bent almost double, along the narrow path. The grey light, however, increased, and by the time she had reached the termination of the passage, and emerged into a walled chamber, she was able to recognise it as the cellar, through the grating of which the clear morning rays were streaming. The cause, then, of the underground noises she had heard at night was at once apparent: they had been made by the strokes of the pickaxe when the man at work in the passage had come to the cellar-wall, and begun to loosen the bricks. No wonder that, having seen no sign of disturbance of the soil, or of the grating without, her suspicions of some thief having effected an entrance below-stairs had been set at rest; for who could have dreamt of such a method of ingress as had been really adopted?

That the robber was Dennis Blake she could have no doubt; reduced to beggary and ruin, it was not unlikely that the idea should have struck him of thus possessing himself, unsuspected, of the wine in her husband's cellar, with the value of which he was so well acquainted; but as to what had caused his offence to be condoned, and the offender to be taken into her husband's confidence, that was a mystery as great as ever.

In the place in which Maggie now found herself she had never before set foot. The cellar, it will be remembered, had been bricked up by John's orders on the very morning after his brother's sudden departure, and in a sort of abhor-

rence, as was understood, of the habits of life which had led to it and to poor Richard's ruin, and as a testimony against them. The last person who had entered it by the door had been probably Richard himself.

Nothing since that time had apparently been removed, and indeed, it was certain that the marauder had been discovered just at the moment when he had first made good his entrance. The bins still contained a considerable supply of wine, and the undisturbed dust of years had accumulated upon them. By the steps leading to the bricked-up door was a broken bottle, the contents of which, long dried up, had left a dark stain on the stone floor. The whole scene presented a picture of desolation and desertion, in which there was small temptation to tarry. Moreover, there was a chance, however slender, while she did so, of some one coming to the tool-house and finding what she had found. Maggie, therefore, retraced her steps thither as quickly as the slipperiness of the incline would permit; and, having covered the excavation with timber and brushwood, so as to conceal it from any casual visitor, she took her way to her father's house.

CHAPTER XXIX.

JOHN'S LEGACY.

BUT for that chance suggestion of honest Mrs Morden's, Maggie's task with her father would have been difficult indeed. She would have had to invent some incredible story, to account for her husband's absence, and would have contradicted herself in a thousand particulars. As it was, she had merely to describe John's sudden and unaccountable illness, his strangeness of manner and aspect (without, however, mentioning the actual transformation that had taken place with him in the latter respect), and lastly, his inexplicable disappearance, to produce the very effect that she most desired.

"Why, good heavens ! John must have gone mad !" was, in fact, the engraver's involuntary exclamation, on hearing her tidings ; and though, shocked upon Maggie's account at his imprudence, he immediately strove to soften the force of his own words, she saw that they represented his belief.

"No doubt," said he, "this is but some temporary aberration, probably the result of fever, for your husband is just the very last man in the world to become a lunatic ; so judicious, so calm and unexcitable, and, even under the most trying circumstances—with one single exception, which might have stirred a stoic,—has always shown so much self-command and self-restraint."

How well she knew it, and how poignantly that reference to his quarrel with Dennis Blake went to her very soul ! John

was not mad, she felt, and also that that very man was, somehow or other, the cause of his appearing to be so. Blake might be lying dead at that moment, and he who slew him fleeing from the far-stretching hands of outraged Justice ; and what should she do to aid his flight ?

"The first thing, Maggie, as it seems to me, that we should set about," returned her father gravely, "is to advertise the fact of his disappearance. It is sure to attract notice enough, considering that the very same thing—though under widely different circumstances—happened to his brother before him. Sympathy may be lacking in John's case, for he was far too good to be appreciated, save by the few who really knew him ; but interest will certainly not be wanting, and interest in this matter is only another name for help. He cannot have gone far ; and it is all-important to take prompt measures : we should at once send word to the papers and the police."

"Not yet, father, not yet," answered Maggie earnestly. "Suppose John should come back—and, for all we know, he may be at home this very moment—and the fit, or whatever it may be, should have passed away,—consider how vexed and annoyed he would be at our having made such a disturbance about him. He is, as you say, by no means so popular as he deserves to be, and malicious tongues have been busy with him enough, as it is."

"There is reason in that," returned the engraver thoughtfully ; "and his sudden disappearance is sure to suggest to people what occurred to Richard, and so reopen that old sore. Indeed, one could not expect it to be otherwise. The coincidence is certainly most extraordinary : some wicked fools will be quite capable of calling it 'a judgment,' no doubt. It is just two years ago, is it not, and the very same time of year ?"

"I forget—I believe so," said Maggie, her thoughts incapable of dwelling upon Richard's fate at all. "It seems to

me that it would be far better to do nothing at present, but only to hope and wait."

"Well, well, dear, perhaps you are right: we will not authorise the matter to be made public. Still, it is quite certain to ooze out, if not to-day, to-morrow: it will be impossible to keep Mrs Morden's tongue from running, for one thing. If she were but immortal, the principle of perpetual motion would have been discovered at once. Still, for your credit's sake—for it will seem so strange to sit down under such a catastrophe and make no sign—I think I will just step round to Mr Linch, and tell him in confidence what has happened. He is a good man, and not a fool, notwithstanding that he is next kin to one" (this was in reference to his sister Martha), "and his advice may be worth having. It was a thousand pities, my dear Maggie, that you didn't send for the doctor when your husband was first taken ill, for the symptoms might then have been detected, and we should have been put upon our guard."

"John objected to that," said Maggie quietly. It was a relief to her when she could give an answer without reflecting upon its possible consequences. "I don't think he would have seen Dr Naylor, even if you had sent him to Rosebank."

"I daresay not: he was doubtless very obstinate, which is itself, I believe—that is, in men—a sign of aberration. With women it is just the other way; not that you were ever obstinate, Maggie, except in one thing, and you thought better of that in the end. Even as things look for the moment, you don't repent, darling, of having given way about that, do you?"

"No, father," sighed Maggie: "I have had no cause to repent; dear John has always been the best of husbands to me."

"And you have paid him back at last as he deserved," said the old man fondly. "Now you have lost him, though it is

doubtless but for a little, you have found out how much you love him. These trials are not always sent for evil.—But I am falling into the preaching vein, which naturally reminds me of John Linch. I will just call and have a few words with him—I don't offer to take you with me, because of that magpie Martha, who is sure to insist upon seeing you ; and then I will come on to Rosebank, where I trust to hear better news. Here's Master Willie come, in the meantime, to comfort you."

This referred to the entrance of the maid with her young charge, whose hands and face she had polished up to a fine pitch, in order to greet his adopted mother. The engraver's words had been mere matters of course ; but the sight of the child—whose very existence she had for the moment almost forgotten—was really a balm to Maggie of wondrous potency.

As she clasped him in her arms, the welcome tears rained from her eyes for the first time since her miseries had fallen upon her : the iron band that had seemed to press upon her forehead relaxed a little, and the gloom of the future was pierced by a ray of light. Here was something, whatever happened, to live for and to love. The next moment, remembering that her father at least remained to her, tender and devoted as he had ever been, she reproached herself for the thought ; but, in truth, there was no need to do so. It was the dependence of the child upon herself that had so deeply moved her. She was necessary to it, and would be so for years to come ; and, as it crowed for joy, and smoothed her cheek with hands not more soft than it, she felt a rest and solace which not all the art of Mesmer has the power to bestow upon his votaries. The desire to take the boy back with her to her desolate home was strong within her ; but to have done so now would have seemed to be to seize the first opportunity of John's absence to take to herself something that had been Richard's, and therefore she put the temptation from her. With John

her lot had been cast, and not even in the eyes of others would she appear to desert him.

It was nevertheless, with a heavy heart that she returned to Rosebank, to await, in miserable suspense, she knew not what tidings (except that they could not be good) of her missing husband.

Shortly after her return, her father arrived with Mr Linch. The latter gentleman was urgent for immediate action : he had no doubt that John was labouring under an attack of insanity ; and pointed out what a great responsibility would rest upon his friends if he should do a mischief to any one, and they had given no public warning as to his state of mind. He himself searched the house, and explored the garden, including the tool-house, but discovered nothing. The snow was still falling heavily, and must, long ago, reflected Maggie, with a sense of satisfaction, have obliterated her husband's footmarks of the previous night : disclosure, involving danger and disgrace, seemed to her to lie in the direction of the little wood. When the short day, that seemed more long to her than any day in June, drew to its close, and still John came not, it was pressed upon her that the police should be communicated with, and to this she at last consented. Surely, if the worst she feared had happened—if Blake had come to any violent or sudden end, it would have been noised abroad by this time. Next to news of her husband, she longed to hear some tidings of his enemy : to know that he was alive, even if it was but to work harm to them, would have been an inexpressible comfort.

She had had bad nights of late, but never such a night as this one, in which nothing happened. She had dreaded the solitude of the house, as a timorous child shrinks from the coming dark, but resolutely refused her father's offer to remain at Rosebank. She dared not have a witness to John's return, in case he should return, though she had small hope of that ;

indeed, she had no hope at all ; she felt not only that he would not come back, but that it was well he did not ; that it was somehow better for him to be a hundred miles away, and speeding farther still. Yet every blast of wintry wind that shook the door brought her to her bedroom window, to peer forth for him ; and all the noises of the night had dread significance. Now she seemed to hear him moving stealthily about the parlour, and now at work with spade and pickaxe in the cellar beneath. No sick man ever longed for morning as poor Maggie did, nor, when it dawned, gathered so little comfort from the light. In a few hours all Hilton would learn what had happened, when rumour would be busy with her woe, and the forked tongues of malice would flicker about her and hers like flame. Nor did her fears exaggerate what actually took place. She was down betimes, and noticed that every person that came to the door as usual tarried there longer than was his wont—the milkman, and the postman, and the baker—each, doubtless, to satisfy his curiosity by questions, or to express his wonder. She eagerly looked for letters. “Surely, surely, I shall know something now,” said her beating heart at the postman’s knock ; but none came ; and when she opened the local newspaper, the first paragraph that met her eyes was headed thus : *The Mysterious Disappearance from Rosebank*. As her father had expected, her husband’s departure had at once been associated with that of his brother, and a parallel drawn between them. There was even a sensational suggestion that some disused and forgotten well-hole might lie within the grounds of Rosebank, where both had met their fate, and a thorough investigation of the locality was recommended. Suppose they should examine the spinney and discover the new-made grave ! In the wildest of her horror at this idea, there arrived, as if to realise it, the inspector of police. Curiously enough, in all her reflections upon what would happen, this inevitable visitor

had not occurred to her, and it required all her self-command to meet him with calmness.

He was a mild and gentle-mannered man, however, who evidently sympathised with her position, and would, doubtless, have made every allowance for her confusion. After a few questions, to which she had no difficulty in replying, he inquired with an indifferent air—like one who expects an answer in the negative—whether she had noticed any signs of trouble or anxiety about her husband of late. Here she hesitated, in view of possible contingencies. Would it be better to answer “Yes,” or “No”? If “Yes,” that would lead to fresh inquiries as to the nature of his trouble; if “No,” that would militate against the theory of his having become deranged.

“Have you any cause, for instance, to suppose Mr Milbank to have been in pecuniary difficulties?” continued the inspector, proceeding with his interrogatory.

“Certainly not,” answered she firmly. “He had no material cause for disquietude of any kind.” Here she had fallen into the common error of unaccustomed witnesses—that of saying too much.

“No material cause, you say; was there any imaginary one, then—any unfounded apprehension, for instance?”

“No, no,” answered she hastily. “I meant material as opposed to mental. I have an impression that his mind was disturbed, not balanced as equally as usual.”

“Why?”

The inspector had got his note-book out, and was setting down her replies in the methodical manner peculiar to his profession. Why did he not warn her, as she had a vague idea he ought to do, that she need not answer anything of a compromising nature, and that all she did answer would be used to her disadvantage? She found her mind wandering in a legal labyrinth of what was justifiable on the part of a

policeman, and what was not, without the power of grasping the subject in hand at all. Was it possible that, under the pressure of her anxieties, she herself was going mad ? ”

“ Why ? ” repeated the inspector, even more persuasively than before, but at the same time regarding her very fixedly. “ Why had you cause to suppose his mind was off its balance ? ”

“ Well from his manner when he was taken ill : his refusal to send for the doctor, or let any one see him beside myself.”

“ Just so. He never dropped the least hint to you, either before or during his illness, of his intention to leave home.”

“ Never. He has never left home, nor wished to do so even for a day, since we have been married.”

“ Never left home, nor wished to do so,” mused the inspector gravely. He was a married man, and wrote her answer down with unusual care, as though it was a phenomenon in human experience. “ Your husband left no letter behind him, of course, nor any document in his desk, or elsewhere, referring even remotely to any intention of departure ? ”

The inspector said “ of course,” because to examine a man’s desk, under such circumstances, would have occurred to himself as the first thing to be done ; but, as a matter of fact, Maggie had made no such examination. John’s desk had been as sacred to her in his absence as it was when he was at home, and though she at once perceived that she ought not to have left that stone unturned, she was not going to confess it in the presence of one who might propose to assist—and perhaps have the authority to do so—in prosecuting such a research. If there was anything in that desk to explain this mystery, her own eyes, and no other’s should be the first to penetrate it.

“ My husband left behind him no allusion to his departure of any kind,” said Maggie. “ I have no more conception

what has become of him than you yourself." There was something in her manner, perhaps, as well as her words, that suggested a termination of the interview, for the inspector here asked permission to look over the house and premises, and for the present took his leave.

Maggie could not help speculating within herself as to the result of his investigations ; he could hardly expect to find John himself, and it occurred to her that, being accustomed to the exploitation of burglaries, he was following his instincts, without having regard to the particular case in hand. In this, however, she underrated Mr Inspector's intelligence, whose maxim was to consider nothing beneath his attention, when engaged in any inquiry, and when it was possible to look into everything with his own eyes.

Presently he returned, with the same demeanour of undemonstrative calm as before, to put still another question or two before taking leave of the lady of the house.

"I believe Mr Milbank was a very abstemious gentleman, was he not, madam ?" The speaker's use of the past tense jarred upon her for the second time ; it seemed to corroborate the presentiment within her that she should never see her husband more.

"Yes, he was very temperate in his habits," said Maggie. "Indeed, he was a teetotaler."

"So I understand, ma'am ; which is, in fact, the very reason why I have a certain suspicion. Teetotalers, like the rest of the world, sometimes repent themselves of their good intentions, and yet don't wish to appear backsliders, as they call it. You will excuse my plainness of speech," interpolated the inspector blandly, "in consideration of the object I have in view."

"Most certainly," replied Maggie quietly. "But my husband was never intoxicated in his life ; at least I will answer for him during his married life. You are quite on the wrong

scent, if you imagine drink has anything to do with this unhappy matter."

"Yet Mr Milbank bricked up his cellar-door, did he not? Now, don't you think that looked like a want of confidence in himself?"

"Oh no! that was done for quite a different reason."

"And he never repented of the circumstance, you think, nor of having taken the pledge?"

"Never."

"Would it not surprise you, then, madam, to learn," continued the inspector, sinking his voice to a confidential whisper, "that there is a means of communicating with the cellar beneath this room, independently of the door, so that one might go and help one's self to wine without the knowledge of persons in the house."

"It would surprise me very much," said Maggie, with well-feigned amazement. As that nameless peril, so much the more dreadful, because it had not a name, drew nearer and nearer to her, her wits seemed to sharpen themselves for the conflict. The inspector's eyes, that had proved so keen in detecting the underground passage, were baffled by her incredulous face. "Yet such," he went on, "I do assure you, madam, is the case. I could prove it to you—did I not think it injudicious to call the attention of others to the fact—at this moment."

Should she tell him that what he had told her was no news? Should she confess to him that she was aware of the secret passage, and that her husband used it for the purpose he had suggested?

Would it be for John's advantage, with reference to the dark and unknown future that lay before him, to make a pitiful appeal to this man's generosity, and ask him to keep her husband's shame a secret? Perhaps it might be so; yet her mind revolted from representing John as a drunkard and

a hypocrite, though such an admission might strengthen the one strand of hope, to which, in case of the worst, she had to cling—the theory of his mental derangement.

“Whatever you may have discovered,” said she, after a moment’s pause, “would not alter the experience of years, or place it in a new light before me. My husband’s mind may for the time have given way, or deserted him—that is, indeed, the only possible explanation to me of what has happened—but that was never brought about by drink.”

The inspector looked puzzled and disappointed: he had made a discovery, and built a theory upon it, and it was hard to see the latter fall to pieces; but he acknowledged to himself that it had done so.

The discovery, however, still remained for a foundation to build something else upon.

“You have never heard, I suppose, that Mr Milbank had any personal enemy?”

“Oh no. He went but little into society, and, consequently, knew but very few people. With those he did know, however, he was on most cordial terms. His workpeople to a man, also, I have always understood, held him in great respect.”

Maggie had had this answer cut and dried, and laid up in store from the first, in order to meet that very question. She felt that this man would put it to her sooner or later, and that it was the most momentous of all. The inspector, as she guessed, had as yet but two alternatives in his mind respecting that possible catastrophe, which, with every hour, was becoming more probable. The missing man had either done some mischief to himself, or a mischief had befallen him at the hands of another; and this second idea it was essential to dispel, lest it should suggest to him a third—the conviction of Maggie’s own mind—that her husband had done mischief to another man, and had fled from the consequences thereof. In this, thanks to the readiness and confidence of her last reply,

it seemed she had succeeded : the inspector closed his note-book with something like a sigh, as though all his ingenious theories had come to nothing ; and, with an assurance that no effort should be wanting upon his part, nor on that of his assistants, to prosecute the search after her husband, and dispel the mystery by which his disappearance was surrounded, he respectfully took his leave.

The relief which Maggie experienced upon the withdrawal of the police official was great and twofold. The examination was over, which had cost her so much to undergo, and, upon the whole, it had ended satisfactorily. With the instinct of a bird whose young are threatened by some roving schoolboy, and who pretends, by flitting from bough to bough on some distant tree, with pitiful cries, that her nest is elsewhere than it is, she had contrived to throw this human beagle off the scent ; and she was now at liberty, alone, and free from prying eyes, to put into effect what the inspector had taken for granted had been already done, the examination of her husband's desk. There it stood, just as he had left it not forty-eight hours ago, with the key in it, and a bunch of keys depending from it, among them that of the house and of the office ; a fact which itself had seemed to indicate to her that he had done with both, and would never cross the threshold of either again. Her trembling touch had already discovered it was locked ; but that was no sign that John had meant it to remain unopened, a very Bluebeard's chamber, from herself, but was more likely a slight precaution against meddling curiosity. Still she hesitated to turn the key. Her husband, it was true, except during this last unhappy week, had had no secrets from her, so far as she knew ; but, by common consent, they had kept silence, save on those occasions with which we are acquainted, upon one subject, very near to both their hearts, and it was more than probable there lay within that desk some painful records with respect to it. There would, without doubt, be

letters of Richard's—some, perhaps, breathing anything but brotherly love ; memoranda of his debts, and, generally, evidences of his bad behaviour. In that supreme moment of anxiety and suspense, it curiously flashed upon her, that her father's invention of the "terminable ink" would, in such a case, be an inestimable blessing. If all the letters that have been written from brother to brother in scorn and hatred since the world began could have been so indited—if written words did *not* remain to add fuel to the flame of wrath whenever the eye reverted to them, but became a harmless blank, what ill-blood would have been spared to poor humanity ! It would be a dreadful thing to come upon some insolent, defiant, ungrateful letter of poor misled Richard's, *now*. Thus she pictured the matter to herself, as she stood with one hand upon the lid, and the other on the key ; but in reality her indecision was owing to the more substantial fear that she might find the very thing she sought. The pain of a diseased limb is hard to bear, and, in the end, unless removed, must needs become intolerable ; but when the moment of amputation comes, the patient shrinks from it, though he knows the thing must be, and will eventually bring relief ; and distressing as Maggie's present condition was, it seemed, for the moment, preferable to a revelation which might be the confirmation of all her fears. And yet, how *could* that be, when whatever she found must needs have been written before her husband left his home ! Indeed, she now remembered, that on that last unhappy night she had heard him unlock his desk—perhaps, nay, what was more likely—to set down his reasons for that very abandonment of her and home which was about to ensue. Here she opened the desk, with woman's haste, and threw back the lid ; and the first thing her eye lit upon was a sealed paper, directed in a handwriting that, but for the terms of the address, she would not have recognised. Her husband's hand was singularly clear and clerkly, whereas each word lying

before her now was ragged and ill-formed as her father's writing had been wont to be when he began to recover from his paralysis. Yet there was no doubt whose fingers had penned them. "*For my wife : to be opened when I am dead, or when she shall have lost faith in me.*"

CHAPTER XXX.

AN EAVESDROPPER.

MAGGIE held in her hand, she had no doubt, the revelation of the mystery which had oppressed her for so many hours, and could have resolved it by the breaking of a seal. But the idea of doing so never entered her mind. Her husband's prohibition would have been all-sufficient for her, however expressed ; but couched as it was in such touching terms, she would not have disobeyed it for an empire. She felt that she never could disobey it, whatever happened ; that so long as she had reason to believe he was alive, that packet would be inviolable ; for as to the alternative, " Or when she shall have lost faith in me," that was a supposition that her mind refused to entertain. There had been a time when she had not loved her husband as she did now, but there had been no time when she had not put faith in him. He was well aware of that himself, and hence this exceptional permission must needs have reference to some trial of her confidence in him yet to come. Whatever it might be, it would find her ready for it : deaf to every malicious tongue, blind to every act of his, which those who knew him less well might set down to an unworthy motive ; or, still better, both hearing and seeing, she would have a justification for him, satisfactory to her own heart at least, let the world say what it would. What must he have suffered, what must he be suffering now, unconsolated, unsympathised with, alone ! How out of all proportion was

his punishment to his offence, since it could not be that she had imagined. What he had written in this paper could never be a confession that he was going forth to slay his enemy. No ; a thousand times no ! Whatever Dennis Blake might have done, or threatened to do, the idea that John should make up his mind beforehand to put him to death—"of malice aforethought," as the law sternly designates it—was too terrible and monstrous ; and, moreover, he had passed his word that he would take no such vengeance. The enigma of his disappearance, however, remained only the more inexplicable. What could have happened—short of the crime which it was evident he had not committed—to change him in one short night from young to old, and to drive him from his wife and home for ever ?

Sitting by the fire, plunged in gloomy but vague conjecture, and holding in her hand what would doubtless have resolved all her fears at a single glance, but which not iron and steel could have made more inviolable to her, she suddenly became aware that the French window opening on the lawn had become darkened behind her ; that somebody was standing there, and in all probability watching her through its pane. Depressed and anxious as she was, she had not lost her presence of mind ; on the contrary, the sense of the necessity of being mistress of herself had strung her nerves to meet almost any shock. If she was being watched, there must be a reason for it ; something was sought to be learnt, perhaps, from her air and manner, when she was alone, and fancied herself unobserved. The inspector might not have been so satisfied with his interview as he had pretended to be, and might have taken this means—by no means unnatural to one of his calling—to judge for himself of the reality of the calmness and self-possession she had assumed before him. A shudder ran through her at the thought that if he had taken such a step ten minutes before, immediately when, as she

imagined, he had left the house, he would have seen her open the desk and take out the packet. Upon the packet, at this very moment, perhaps, his eyes were fixed. Its seal was turned towards him, and not its address. That was so far good, though, indeed, at the distance at which he stood, it was almost impossible he could have deciphered a word. She tapped it against her chin with an indifferent air, as one in thought might use a pencil or a paper-knife. Priceless and portentous as were its contents to her, sooner than let this man or any man possess himself of them, she would have cast it into the fire. Then, as if to shade her eyes from the fire-light, she put up her hand before them, and glanced through her fingers up at the looking-glass, in which she knew the figure of the watcher would be reflected. It was well, indeed, that she took that precaution, for the sight that met her gaze was one to have overcome the most strenuous effort at self-possession. Close to the window, with his face pressed against the pane, and regarding her with a look of wolfish hate, stood Dennis Blake ! A more frightful spectacle than his scowling countenance, made darker than even its ordinary hue by reason of the falling snow, it would have been hard to imagine ; but it wore besides an expression of triumphant malice, which she felt that she, and only she, could have evoked in it. That he had driven her husband from his roof, and was come to gloat over her in her despair and loneliness, she read plainly enough ; but that wolfish face said more ; he had only struck the first blow, and was meditating, in his cruel heart, a second and more fatal one. Unhappily, it would not be a direct blow ; in that case, she would not have flinched from it—she felt too much hate and scorn of him to harbour fear. If the conflict had been only between her and him, she would have defied him to his face, and dared his worst ; but he was about to strike at her—it was as plain to her as though she saw his lifted knife and John

between them—through her already stricken husband. And how should she ward the blow? These thoughts passed through her in a flash, more quickly than one snow-flake was succeeding another, and then she rose and confronted him. Perhaps he had expected her to start and shriek, for he held up his hand, as if for silence; but she was careful to exhibit mere pained surprise, indignant annoyance.

"Let me in," said he, with his mouth against the pane. "I wish to have a word with you alone. You had best do it," added he menacingly.

She would have unlocked the glass door and let him in, but for the packet, which had doubtless already caught his eye, and which she felt he would have been quite capable of taking from her by force. "If you have business with me, my servant will admit you," answered she haughtily.

He hesitated, and cast a look at the frail barrier between them, such as made her seize the bell-rope in alarm. Then muttering something between his teeth, he shrunk away and the next moment she heard his ring at the front door.

In an instant she had hidden the packet in her bosom, and felt, by comparison, sheathed in mail, and armed to meet him.

"There's Mr Dennis Blake, of all men, at the door, ma'am!" exclaimed the housekeeper, entering precipitately, and with undisguised alarm. "I judged, of course, you would not see him—still, it is quite possible he might have some news of master."

"That is to the last degree unlikely," observed Maggie coldly. "Still, if he has really business with me, show him in."

It seemed that Mr Dennis Blake had business with her, for immediately afterwards he was ushered in. At the sight of this man standing under her own roof-tree, whom she verily believed to have had some hand in Richard's death, her

heart began to beat with passionate indignation ; yet she dared not lay her hand upon it, lest she should betray the presence of that secret which, very literally, lay next her heart. The door had closed behind him, and they were alone ; still, for some moments neither spoke, but stood regarding the other, like fencers about to engage, and who have taken the buttons off their foils. At last Blake spoke in that hoarse, sullen voice, that is so often the index of mental deformity, and which perhaps he could not have softened if he would : "Is the man gone that was here awhile ago ?"

"What man ?"

"The policeman. Don't suppose that I was asking upon my own account," continued he, with a sneer, in reply to her gesture of assent. "A policeman is nothing to me, one way or another."

If she had never entertained a suspicion of this ruffian's having broken the law, she would have entertained it now ; his insolent, braggart air was the very hall-mark of Felon. So furious did it make her against him, recalling as it did to her his imputed crime, that she felt a desire to take him by the throat and tax him with it.

"If you are come here, as you have said, upon business, Mr Blake," said she sternly, "I must beg that you confine yourself to that topic."

"I will," said he, approaching her, with menacing eyes, and striking his clenched hand upon the table. "Your husband is my topic, madam ; where is he ?"

"That is the question—supposing I wished to put any question to you, which I do not," returned Maggie fiercely—"that I should rather ask of *you* ! He has left me without warning, *just as his brother left this house two years ago !*"

"Ah !"—he stepped back a pace, but keeping his eyes fixed upon her with great intentness—"you associate those two circumstances together, do you ?"

"I do ; and I associate them both with you."

"There you are right," said he with a crooked smile, that seemed to her to speak of audacious guilt—the triumphant hardihood of impunity. "My business, then, will need the less introduction. If it should try your nerves a little, that is not my fault, but his who has made this visit necessary. I ask you once more, madam, where is your husband ? He has left you, you say, without warning, as his brother did, yet not, I will venture to assert, without letting his dear wife—that should have been his brother's—know whither he has gone. And I must know that too. I should have kept to my bargain, and left you alone, unmolested, if he had kept to his. But if he has run away, that is equivalent to breaking it."

"Run away ? What cause should my husband have to run away ?" answered Maggie boldly. "What thing has John Milbank ever done of which he need be ashamed ? What man exists whom he can have cause to fear ?"

"With the thing, madam, I hope it will not be necessary to trouble you just at present, nor perhaps even at all ; but as to the man, that individual now stands before you."

"What ? would you have me believe that my husband fears Dennis Blake—the ruined cheat, the blackleg, the slanderer of a girl's fair fame, and whom he cudgelled in the public street for soiling it ! You lie, you coward !"

Blake's dusky face grew livid with rage, and in his eyes there came a sudden fire that seemed to dry their unwholesome moisture up. "I do not lie, madam," said he, in a grating voice ; "yet I am not so rude as to contradict a lady. You believe all you say, no doubt. John Milbank is incapable of an evil action, far less of a criminal one : so wise, so good, so temperate, that he may be called a model man, and especially the Best of Husbands ; and, on the other hand, this Dennis Blake may have been all you say—cheat, slanderer,

coward ; still the fact remains that it is from this very Dennis Blake, and for abject fear of him, that your husband has left his home. And if you ask me, Why ? it is for this simple reason, that Dennis Blake can bring him to the gallows !”

Maggie forced an incredulous laugh ; but her heart seemed suddenly to wither within her, and the light of life itself to flicker in its socket, as though in act to leave her ; for she believed him. Her faith in John was as firm as ever ; he could never have been guilty of any crime, save that of which this wretch's presence proved him innocent. But though John might be infallible, the law was not ; and somehow—she had not the faintest notion how—he might have innocently forfeited his life to it, become the victim of some conspiracy, which had pointed him out to purblind Justice. That he stood in dread of some great danger or catastrophe she already knew, and doubtless this was it. What should she do ; To defy him, to rid herself, at all hazards, of this man's polluting presence, was her first impulse ; but the very ease of such a course made her mistrustful of it. If Blake had really any grave accusation to make against her husband, the absence of the accused could not fail to give it weight. The next day, or hour, might bring him home, or at all events, bring tidings of his whereabouts, which might enable her to communicate with him and put him on his guard. Moved by these reflections, Maggie swallowed her pride and anger, though they went nigh to choke her, and resolved to temporise.

“ You smile, madam,” continued Blake, “ at the notion of this model husband of yours having put his neck in danger, yet I possess the proof of it in his own handwriting ; so much I will tell you : more I have no wish to tell, unless I am compelled to do so. I would not have intruded upon you to-day if he himself had not driven me to it. It was only by a happy accident that I chanced to be still at Hiltou,

and thereby came to know that he had cut and run. But I must be certified that he has not done so for good and all. The case stands thus, madam : I hear on all sides that John Milbank has taken himself off, not even his wife knows whither. The papers are full of it ; the police are busy with it ; I cannot be blind and deaf to what is passing under my own eyes and ears. Thus, notwithstanding that I promised your husband to keep quiet for the present, yet I am obliged to bestir myself. If he really is not here, I must put the screw on *you* ! ”

Maggie heard but little of these excuses : she had only a general impression of menace—of ruin held in suspense over her for some motive which, whatever it might be, had nothing to do with mercy ; the words that kept ringing in her ears were these ; “ I possess the proof of it in his own handwriting ; ” the proof, that was, of her husband’s culpability in the eye of the law. That Blake did possess it she had no doubt. His presence there was too audacious to be explained by anything short of the fact. If the life and honour of her husband were not in this man’s hand, he at least imagined that they were so. An idea flashed upon her, which for the moment lit up her soul with hope. If this compromising document had been written within the last forty hours, all might yet be well if only time were given. Doubtless it was when about to write it, driven by some inexorable power, the nature of which she could not guess, that her husband had come up to her room that night to ask for the terminable ink. In this case, whatever he had written would be null and void in a few days.

“ You do not appear to be favouring me with your attention, madam,” continued Blake sternly. “ Yet, with a word—a single word—I could rivet it, if I chose. What I was about to remark was, that there was no time to lose in obtaining security for what is due to me ; since at present I have re-

ceived nothing—nothing, that is, beyond a few pounds to pay a tailor's bill—except very handsome promises.”

“If what you say is true, or any of it,” observed Maggie calmly, “how comes it you have not received your dues? How does it happen that you have gone so long without them, and that only when my husband leaves his home you come hither to put the screw, as you call it, upon an unprotected woman? You would never have dared to come if he had been here!”

“I should not have come, madam—not because I was afraid of him; the fear is quite on the other side, I do assure you—but simply because, in that case, there would have been no occasion for my coming. The little arrangement between him and me dates only from the other night, nor had I the slightest reason to doubt Mr Milbank's intention of fulfilling it, until I heard that he had fled from his home. The creditor is naturally suspicious when he hears that his debtor has levanted; and I have come here to know for certain from your lips how matters stand. If your husband has really taken himself off, there is no need for concealment between you and me as to the why and wherefore; you must then indeed know all, or you might fail to perceive the necessity of being my banker; but if, on the other hand, he is coming back again, I warn you that I had better not let the cat out of the bag, for it is a cat he would be very unwilling for you to see.”

“I have no wish to pry into my husband's secrets,” observed Maggie steadily, “and least of all to hear them from the lips of such a man as you.”

“That is very dutiful, madam, and very wise—wiser, perhaps, than you have any idea of. (The compliment to myself I pass over, as being beside the question.) Yes—to be convinced, against one's will, of the infamy of the Best of Husbands—nay, if you flare up at *that*, you are certainly right

to shun the truth—of course it is better to keep your eyes shut, and hope the best. But still I have my own interest to look to, and that may compel me to open them."

"To keep her eyes shut, and hope the best!" That taunt of this heartless wretch exactly described the condition of mind at which Maggie had arrived. Her only safety from despair seemed to lie in ignorance. She might indeed, perhaps, have dared to learn the worst, but for the remembrance of the packet that lay in her bosom. "When I am dead, or when you have lost your faith in me, seek to know all, but not till then," it said. And she would wait till then.

"I do not understand what it is you want of me," said she, after a long pause.

"I want nothing—for the present—except a little information. You told me awhile ago that you did not know whither your husband had gone. Now, with the new lights that may have broken upon you in the meantime, just reconsider that answer. I have no doubt you gave it to the inspector, to your father, to Mr. Lynch, and the rest of them; but still, it may not have been *quite* correct, for all that. The rumour—propagated by yourself, as it in all probability has been—that John Milbank has gone mad is, I *know*, untrue: on Tuesday night last, I can answer for it, he was quite well in health, and in full possession of his faculties. It would be very well for him if he did go mad, perhaps, but that would not suit my book. Now, since you have stooped to one little deception, you may possibly have ventured upon another. He may have told you everything, for all I know, and the whole affair may be a plant to escape his liabilities. You must, therefore, excuse my once more repeating a question you have already answered in the negative."

"I do not know where my husband is, Mr. Blake," said Maggie firmly, "nor why he has left me. On the other hand, you are right in supposing that I have practised some decep-

tion. My husband is not mad ; it was to save my own wifely pride from humiliation that, having no reason to give for his desertion of me, I feigned he was so : Mr Milbank is as sane as I am."

"And he has written to you since his absence?" broke in the other cunningly. "You were reading a letter from him just before I entered ; I should like to see that letter." And he cast a greedy eye towards the desk.

"My husband's letters are sacred from all eyes but mine," replied Maggie coldly. "I will, however, tell you this much of its contents: though he gives neither address, nor explanation of his absence, he promises to return home within the week."

"The week!" echoed Blake, glancing at her with quick suspicion. "Why the week?"

"I know nothing of that, for he gives his reasons for nothing. 'I shall return on the 14th,' he says ; that is all he writes about his movements."

"I don't understand it," mused Blake thoughtfully. "But then, unless he was really mad—which we both know he is not—I don't understand his going away at all. He knows he cannot escape me ; that death itself would only transfer my hold on him from him to you. Yes, you would have to pay, madam, handsomely, liberally, if you have the regard for him with which he credits you, and which I do not doubt. Still, you may have some plan between you by which you imagine that Dennis Blake may be checkmated. You would be building on the sand, it is true, nay, on the ice itself ; and your punishment would be swift and dire. That would not be to my advantage, I confess it," added he sharply ; "but revenge is sweet, and I would have it ; such revenge as you cannot dream of, and which would make up for all. One does not fear to fall, you understand, just so far,"—and he held his hand a few feet from the floor—"when

one drags down one's enemy from his pride of place in the very skies."

"I do not doubt your malice, sir."

"You are right there, madam," cried he with sudden ferocity. "Nor need you doubt my power to indulge it. However, a few days more or less will not alter matters: you may be lying to me—I daresay you are—but I will wait the week."

"And then?"

"Then I shall come again with the confess—— I mean with the proofs I spoke of, in your husband's handwriting, and in his absence make my terms with *you*. They will be such as, if I were to state them now, might well astound you; and yet you will acknowledge that they might be harder. Do not trouble yourself, however, with thinking what that secret is, the hush-money for which is so secure; for when you learn it, take my word for it, that the dearest wish of your heart will be that it could be unlearned. And above all things"—here he stretched out a menacing finger—"do not hope that by any plot or plan you can escape me; my eye will be on you from this hour, vigilant as that of the miser upon his store; and if you did escape, it would only be as the flight of the tethered bird, who, with the first beat of his wing, perceives the string that binds him. You will see me this day week, madam, and at the same time."

"Not the same time," exclaimed Maggie firmly. "If your business is such as you describe it to be, the morning is surely no time for its discussion. We must be alone, and not liable to interruption. Let it be evening."

He looked at her with searching eyes as he replied: "Is this to gain time, mistress? or is it that you do not wish your neighbours to suppose that Dennis Blake is on your list of morning callers? Well, perhaps you are right. If we come to terms—and there is no help for that, I promise

you—it will be better that no connection between me and Rosebank shall have been suspected ; and a few hours more or less cannot affect my position. This day week, then, in the evening.” With a surly sideways nod, pregnant with menace, by way of parting salutation, Maggie’s visitor withdrew, gazing sternly at her to the last, and she at him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN EVENING INTERVIEW.

"THIS day week, then," reflected Maggie, as she stood where Blake had left her, staring thoughtfully into the fire, "this man will be here again with John's confession!" That was the word he used, or had been about to use, and she did not blink it. It was necessary to look all things in the face that it was lawful for her to look at. It was not lawful for her to open the packet she carried in her bosom, and learn the worst—that worst which Blake had told her she would so bitterly wish unlearned; for John was not dead, nor had she even yet lost faith in him. That he had got into trouble, nay, that that there was danger to his life, she did not doubt, and somehow or other this villain had the power to bring destruction and shame upon him. But she did not believe him guilty in a moral sense. If she had done so, nay, if she had had any doubt of him, it would have been clearly her duty to put herself upon equal terms with her enemy, by gaining possession of all the facts, and then to fight him as best she could. As it was, she had small choice of weapons, but of such as they were, she had already made her choice. While she had been listening, or seeming to listen, to her visitor, nay, even while she had been talking to him, she had been all the while selecting it, sharpening it, balancing it in her hand. As to the temper of the blade, she could tell nothing for certain, till the moment had come to strike; but she believed in it, and was

resolved to use it. That was something ! Instead of brooding over her present calamities, or upon the coming peril, she had that blow to think of—the one desperate blow she was about to give, not in self-defence, but in defence of one dearer than herself—and its effect. If the steel were true, and did its duty, it might so cripple her foe that he need be no longer feared ; but if it broke in her grasp and failed her, matters would even be worse than they were. The blow would recoil upon herself—nay, more, upon her husband—and bring upon them both immediate and utter ruin. It was a terrible risk, but she must take the risk, having no option. What a little weapon it was, and, up to this hour, how she had despised it ! If it should do her this good service, how she would prize it, and bless and cherish the dear hand that had placed it within her reach !

The idea of John's returning home, and thereby releasing her from personal responsibility in the affair, did not enter into her mind. She felt that he would never return ; that he dared not do so, because of this vile wretch and what he knew ; that there could be none to help her—and her instinct told her truth.

Hour after hour, day after day, passed by, and yet there came no tidings of John Milbank. Just as in the case of his brother Richard, he had disappeared leaving no trace behind him. No one had seen him in the street, in the highway, nor at the railway station. (They might well have done so, however, thought Maggie bitterly, and yet not recognised him.) The newspapers indulged themselves in the wildest conjectures ; the police were utterly at fault. Mr Inspector Brain (for that was the name of the officer who had "charge" of the now famous "Rosebank case") was often at the house, closeted with Maggie alone, or in consultation there with her father and Mr Linch. But nothing came of all this stir. The traces of John's departure seemed to have melted away

as utterly as the snow on which his last footsteps had been imprinted.

And so the day came round at last which was to bring Dennis Blake and his dread news. Maggie had no hope that he might fail to keep tryst from any cause: that he might have gone away, or that he might be ill, or that he might have repented through any sense of insecurity or loss of power over her. She painted to herself none of those chances in her favour which we are all so apt to paint when a great misfortune threatens us; she clung to no straws, but looked at her peril, not in the face, indeed, for it had no face—it was only a terrible something over which a cloth hung loosely, suggesting the sharp, stiff outlines of Death: but she looked at *that* with steady eyes, hoping and praying that when Blake's cruel hand should twitch it away, and show the features, she should be calm and steady still. Maggie knew that it would have been idle to attempt to conceal that this man had already called at Rosebank, and she had made up some story of an old debt of Richard's to him, which he wished his brother to settle, to account for the fact. It had, fortunately, seemed to those who knew him not inconsistent with Blake's character that he should have taken this audacious step on hearing that John had left his home; the extortion of money under false pretences being a line of business very likely for him to take up, should any opening in that way seem to offer itself. But both Mr Linch and her father had expressed such indignation at the occurrence, that it had actually added a weight to the burden of her cares. What if they should meet, and tax him with his villany, and put him so beside himself with their reproaches, that he should tell *them* the secret of his power over her husband! On this very day, her father had remained with her later than usual, and she was on thorns, lest, while he was still in the house, Blake should present himself at the door, and there should be a scene, such as she dared not picture

to herself, since one of its effects might be to blunt that weapon which was the only hope she had, or even make it useless. In the conflict that was about to ensue between her and Blake, it was above all things essential to her plan that they should be alone. At half-past eight, however, on that long-looked-for evening, the engraver left her, and at nine came Dennis Blake, and was at once, by her directions, admitted into the parlour. The fire was burning brightly, there were candles as well as a lamp upon the table, and the room, with its close-drawn curtains, looked very snug and home-like. Such was the impression, at all events, that it seemed to have upon the new-comer, for he looked around him with great complacency, so much so, indeed, that a casual observer would have concluded that all these evidences of comfort were signs of his own prosperity, and that the place belonged to himself.

"Well, madam, so there is no news of this husband of yours?" said Blake, declining the seat to which Maggie motioned him, and taking his stand-point upon the rug, with his back to the fire, as though he were the proprietor of the house. "No news at all, I suppose?"

"None at all."

"Ah, I thought as much," continued the other bluntly. "He has bolted for good and all, to save his neck."

"I have heard you say that before," observed Maggie, looking quietly up at him, from some work in which she was making-pretence to be engaged; "and I tell you now, as I told you then, you lie!"

"Indeed!" cried he, with a harsh, discordant laugh. "I don't remember that you were quite so sure, or so plump as that. However, it is very excusable. That this model of morality should have done anything wrong, is, of course, astonishing to you; and that, having done it, this Best of Husbands should have run away, and left his wife to bear the

brunt of it, and pay the piper for it, that seems still stranger, don't it?"

"It seems, and is, incredible," observed Maggie coldly.

"Incredible, is it? Well, it may even seem that: however, seeing is believing, they say, and before we have had this talk out I shall be compelled to open your eyes. The story I have to tell you begins from a long time back; but not to be wearisome, let us strike down into it about two years ago, when the incident took place to which I mainly owe the honour of this interview. I allude to Richard Milbank's disappearance. Do you remember on the morning afterwards, your present husband's overtaking me in the street, when you and your father were with him, and putting certain questions to me?"

"I do remember it." Maggie's tones were quiet at all times, but she spoke now with unusual gravity and distinctness, as though she weighed every word.

"Well, what he inquired of me was, whether I had seen Richard on the previous night—or, rather, far into the morning. And I answered 'No.' It was not the truth, yet it was not telling him a lie, inasmuch as he knew that it was not the truth. He knew that Richard had gone from him to me between three and four, and yet that I was not the last person who beheld him ere he left the town."

"Indeed!" observed Maggie, with the air of one who is interested in spite of herself. "How could that be?"

"You should rather ask me, how could I know that it was so," continued the other, "especially since it was your own handiwork that lay at the bottom of it all. Do you remember imitating in jest, and to please the man for whom you would have done it in earnest, John Milbank's signature?"

"No," answered Maggie, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on that of her interlocutor; "I do not."

"You did it, madam, however, nevertheless: I do not say with any bad intentions, but you did it. The piece of paper

on which you wrote that name was an order for a thousand pounds ; and not long afterwards—in the course of business—it happened to fall into my hands. A forged bill, in some cases, is worth quite as much as a good bill, and so it happened with this one. Having my doubts about its genuineness, I went to the drawer myself—your present husband, and, greatly to my surprise, he cashed it. And again—so curious are some mercantile transactions—the money John Milbank paid for that forged bill was not lost to *him*. He got his money's worth out of it—and you, madam, were mixed up in this part of the business every whit as much as at the beginning—by holding it *in terrorem* over Richard's head. 'If you don't leave the country,' he said, 'and the business, and the young woman, for whom I have quite as great a fancy as you have, I'll put you in the dock for forgery.' He'd got Master Richard in a cleft stick, you see, and there was nothing for him but to cave in ; and he did cave in. He wrote a letter, at his brother's dictation, to say that he was about to leave Hilton for good and all ; and John gave him a hundred pounds to go with ; and he went." Here Blake's thin lips broke into a derisive smile, and he repeated the words, "He went," like one who rolls some choice morsel under his tongue.

"Is this all you have to tell me ?" inquired Maggie quietly.

"No ; it is not," answered the other with a sneer ; "nor nearly all. Richard went, but he didn't go very far. Upon his way out of the country, not half a mile out of Rosebank, he stopped at my lodgings, to settle accounts with me. I had promised, you see, not to present the bill for a few months—at which time he hoped to have been safe over the seas, and to snap his fingers at me ; and he was naturally irritated that I should have doubted his stainless honour in the matter, and made personal inquiries. He called, in fact, in a bad humour ;

but I very soon put him into a good one with the news that his brother had admitted the signature of the bill to be his own, and had cashed it. He had no more power to prosecute him then, you see, than if the offence had never been committed. Your husband must have got the character of being a good man of business on very cheap terms, not to have foreseen this, and to have let me keep the bill; but he was soft-hearted, it seems, about the possible consequences, especially as regarded you. You would not have relished giving evidence in open court against your lover, and describing how he had made a cat's-paw of you to rob his brother. Don't you see?"

"I see what you mean," answered Maggie, scarcely able to repress a shudder.

"Well, finding the law could not touch him, Richard cared little for the promise he had given, or the letter he had left behind him, and from that moment thought no more of leaving Hilton than I did; so we sat down together to a friendly game at piquet, in the course of which I won that hundred pound cheque of him, about which there was afterwards such a fuss; and that put his back up, and he said he would play no more, but would go home. Do you understand me? He said he would go home—that is, to this very house."

She understood him well enough, and would have told him so, but that her tongue refused its office.

"It is surely quite intelligible," continued he, misconstruing her silence, "why Richard should have come home. He had no longer cause to fear his brother, and was greatly irritated with him for having frightened him unnecessarily. He had been also drinking pretty freely, and was in the humour for a quarrel. He left my lodgings between four and five in the morning—I let him out with my own hands, and saw him go—and he took the road to Rosebank."

"I have your word for that," said Maggie, in bold, contemptuous tones.

"Yes; you have but that at present, and I don't blame you for not being in a hurry to believe it," continued Blake coolly. "Nor was I in a hurry to believe your excellent husband when he came to me with that cock-and-bull story of his brother having gone away from Hilton to try his fortune in America or the Antipodes. In the first place, he could have had no money to go with unless John had replenished his purse for him; in the next place, he would not have gone if it had been replenished. Master Dick had his own attractions at Hilton besides yourself, as you have since discovered, and was generally disinclined to make his fortune anywhere, preferring to have it ready-made at home by John. However, it was not for me to say so; that one hundred pound bill might still have taken an ugly turn (though I had won it fairly enough), and it was high time to be washing my hands of Dick, for other reasons. I did not wish, either, to have it said of me that I had got that cheque out of him—precious glad, I remember, I was to get it changed—between three and four in the morning at my own lodgings; so, when John asked had I seen his brother that night, I answered 'No.' It was an answer that he was very glad to get, though I saw he didn't believe it; and if I had known what a weight it took from his mind, I would never have uttered it. I might have had him under my heel at that moment—if I had only known all—almost as safe as I have him *now*." Here he raised his foot and beat it upon the rug, as though his enemy were actually and indeed beneath it. "Can you guess at all, my pretty madam, what I am coming to presently?" inquired he hoarsely.

"I can *not*," answered she firmly.

"I daresay not: I did not even guess it myself at that time; I knew John Milbank to be a stuck-up sneak and hypocrite; I hated him almost as I hate him now, even then, but I did not credit him with—MURDER."

Maggie knew what was coming—had been prepared for it from almost the very first—and had never for an instant lost the consciousness of a certain dire necessity for preserving her self-command, yet she shuddered from head to foot as she echoed that dreadful word with her parched tongue: "Murder!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SECRET WITNESS.

"THAT'S it, madam, nothing less," observed Blake, with brutal coolness, after a short pause, during which Maggie for the first time withdrew her eyes from his, and fixed them on the ground.

"'Tis just murder that this excellent husband of yours has committed ; and, as though even that were not enough, the man he has killed was his own brother. Do you hear that !"

"I hear you say so," was Maggie's answer, delivered in such unmoved tones that they surprised herself. Her weakness had been but momentary, and now that she was face to face with the worst, she felt the courage of despair.

"You'd be game to the last I knew," continued Blake, with a sort of grudging admiration ; "or it may be that so far as I have gone as yet, you may think me a liar. One of that trade, however, it ought to strike you, would not have told you so improbable a story—would have stuck to something a little less strong, but more like truth."

It did so strike her ; and though she did not believe the fact—she would as easily have been persuaded that the sun was black, as that John Milbank was a murderer—she did believe that Dennis Blake was stating what he deemed was true. Remembering what her last reply had cost her, she answered him by a haughty gesture expressive of incredulity and contempt.

"Well, it is something that one can get you to listen," continued the other dryly; "that you don't fly out, as some fools would in your case, into a passion and clamour that would ruin all. I always thought you a sensible woman, except as regarded Master Dick—— There, there; I'll say no more about that, then"—for Maggie had risen with such a look of rage and scorn upon her face as bade him pause—"but will proceed to the proof at once. I no more thought at first, as I have said, of anything more serious than a quarrel having happened between the two brothers than you did, notwithstanding it was clear to me John had some good cause for concealing that Richard had returned to him that night; and even when the lost man did not turn up, I took the other's word for granted that he had left the town, notwithstanding the private reasons I had for holding his departure to be unlikely. If, indeed, I had had any ground of suspicion of your husband, I should have worked upon it then, and much more, you may be sure, after I got this"—he moved a lock of dark hair aside that hung over his forehead, and showed a deep white scar. "If I could have hanged him *then*—by Heaven, I would have done it without ransom! To see him swing would have been dearer to me than a mountain of gold!" The vehemence and passion with which Blake pursued this topic, contrasting, as they did, with the calculating coldness he had hitherto displayed, were most remarkable, and showed but too well that gain was not the only object, nor perhaps even the chief one, that he had in view. "To think that for speaking lightly of a girl like you, a man should be so mauled as this"—here he snarled like the cur he was, and showed a row of teeth with which art had supplied him, in lieu of those which John's hit from the shoulder had destroyed—"a girl, who, if she was not the thing I called *that*, was something worse, and cast one brother off for another as one changes shoes. To think, too, that the man

who struck me—that miracle of virtue and soul of honour, as folks deemed him ; so sainted that he could not listen to a broad jest, but must needs arrogate to himself the right of chastising him who uttered it—to think that this man, I say, was a felon, a murderer, whom I could have sent to jail and to the gallows, with a word ! If I could have laid him dead, I would have done it, even then ; but now—knowing what I do—I feel, aye, as though I could tear his heart out with my hands ! You, you too”—he broke out with a fresh access of fury, and pointing at her with a trembling finger—“do you think I will spare *you*, any more than *him*, now my time has come ?”

“Is this the proof that you have to show me of my husband’s guilt ?” inquired Maggie coldly. “At present, I only see the evidence of such malevolence and hate as would have sufficed to forge a proof.”

“It was not necessary to forge it, madam,” answered the other, with a bitter sneer, “as I shall presently show you. About that time—I am speaking of eighteen months ago—I had my own misfortunes”——

“Let me describe them,” interposed Maggie, in the same clear voice she had used at the beginning of their interview. “You lost what little self-respect you had, and took to cheating your acquaintances at cards ; you were turned out of the club, and reduced to beggary : I have seen you in the street myself, in rags.”

“I am not in rags, however, now, madam,” continued Blake, who seemed to have repented of his recent outbreak of passion, and to have recovered his self-control ; “and thanks to the knowledge I possess, and am about to communicate to you, I am not likely to be in rags for the future. Your delicate reference to my late condition is, of course, meant to suggest that my testimony is not unimpeachable. That might be so, if it rested upon my word alone ; but it does not. I

was foolish to fly in a passion, from the mere remembrance of the past, when so much can be remedied ; you were still more foolish to taunt me with my humiliations. Let us proceed with the main business. I was poor ; I *was* reduced to such sore straits that—I own to you frankly—I would have stuck at nothing. In my palmy times, I have often feasted in this very room, and eaten and drunk—especially drunk—of the best ; and while casting about me in London for a livelihood, it struck me that something could be got at Rosebank which would never be missed by its present owner, while it would have put me in funds. I allude to the wine in your husband's cellar”—he stopped a moment, as though to select his words, and then continued, in a harsh, dry tone, as follows : “I had heard that John Milbank had bricked up that cellar on the very day that his brother left his roof—for what reason I knew not, though I can guess it now ; and hence if I could only gain admission to the place, I might, it struck me, get all I wanted, without the risk of discovery. With this intention, I returned to Hilton some weeks ago. With the premises here I was tolerably familiar ; but before entering upon my project I surveyed them with great particularity, taking care to select those times when your husband was at his office. Nothing would have been easier than to have removed the iron grating outside the cellar, but that would have been to have revealed the robbery—I am very plain-spoken, you see, madam, and call a spade a spade—and besides, it was my object to take all the contents of the place, which would have required several nights for their removal. On the whole, therefore, I judged it best to dig into the cellar from the tool-house. The stock of wood for winter use was large, and would conceal my operations ; the spade and pick were ready to my hands. My time was not valuable, and my gain was certain. It was altogether an excellent plan, and I worked it out to perfection. When I

had nearly accomplished my purpose, however, and drew near the cellar wall, my difficulty increased, since, once under the house, every blow of my pick was liable to be heard by those above ; and though I took every precaution, even removing the bricks one by one, this did in fact happen, for your husband was disturbed, and discovered me in the very act. You will ask then, madam, how it was that having no particular liking for your humble servant, he should, under such circumstances, have held his hand—that had once been so quick to avenge your fancied wrongs, or forborne to give me over to the tender mercies of the police. The reason of this was, that before he discovered me in the cellar, I had happened to discover Something there myself. It was not very much—only some clothes and some bones. Permit me to pour you out a glass of water.”

If she had been told at any time during the last two years that, under any possible circumstances, she could have been persuaded to take even so much as a glass of water from the hand of Dennis Blake, Maggie would have indignantly denied it ; yet she took it now, and almost felt grateful to him for that trifling service. Her vital powers and her reason seemed to be alike deserting her, and that at the very moment when she most required resolution and decision.

“The shock is severe, no doubt,” continued her companion grimly, when the colour began once more to faintly tinge her cheek ; “I felt it to be so myself, I do assure you, when that spectacle first met my gaze. To come at midnight, and in the very bowels of the earth, as it were, upon the body of an old acquaintance, lying doubtless on the very spot where he had met his death—it was at the foot of the stone steps”——Maggie held up her hand imploringly, for had she not beheld that very spot herself, with its dark stain on the stone floor, that she was now persuaded had been Richard’s blood !

“I have no desire to distress you, madam, more than is

absolutely necessary," resumed Blake coldly. "So long as you understand the fact, the details may well be spared. I will not even mention the poor victim's name, whose remains lie at this moment exactly as I have described, beneath this very room—under our very feet! The verification of my statement—or its disproof—is easy; but I will suppose that you accept it. There is no more choice for you, indeed, than there was for your husband himself when he found me yonder"—he pointed with his finger downward—"in possession of his ghastly secret. I think there was a moment when he thought to kill me also, and thereby conceal the evidence of his first crime by a second; but I was armed; or perhaps he had already had enough of bloodshedding. 'I know who this was, and by whose hand he came by his end,' said I. He made no effort to deny it, but stood speechless, overwhelmed with remorse and terror. I was frightened myself, I own and eager enough to get to the upper air. 'Go first,' said I (for I was not so foolish as to let him come behind me); and he obeyed me like a child. When we got to the tool-house, I put the wood back over the hole with my own hands, for he seemed quite helpless, and gazed at me like one walking in his sleep. When I told him, however, by way of comfort, how fortunate it was that an old acquaintance like myself, who understood the relations between him and his brother, and could make allowance for great provocation, had discovered his secret, since it would remain quite safely in my hands,—upon certain equitable conditions,—he seemed to recover himself a little, and be inclined to listen to reason. On the other hand, it was foolish in him, and a mere waste of breath, to endeavour to explain to me that the whole affair had happened by accident. That might have been the case or not; if it was so, it was no doubt a matter for his private satisfaction; but so far as I was concerned (as I pointed out to him), it could not make one halfpenny worth of difference

in my pecuniary demands. Again, it was still more foolish in him—the man who had struck me down in the open street—to attempt to appeal to my compassion. I refer to it, however, for two reasons ; first, because his stooping to such a humiliation will bring home to you, more than any words of mine, the fact that he lay—and lies—completely in my power ; and secondly, as a guide for your own proceedings. You have heard of a heart of stone ; but stone may be worn away, they say, by water-drops, and therefore, perhaps, by woman's tears. My heart is made of sterner stuff. Besides, I hate you both, and would not spare you a single turn of the rack—so long as it kept life in you ! ”

“ Monster ! what is it you demand ? ” asked Maggie hoarsely.

“ Money ! A round sum down. So much paid quarterly—and to the very day. It will not beggar you ; you will not go about in rags, as I have done ; but you will be poor, and I shall be rich. Money ! ”

“ I will not give you one farthing, though it were to save your soul.” She had risen from her chair, and stood confronting him with pale, resolute face, and unshrinking eye. “ Thief, by your own admission ; coward, by your presence here ; liar, by the story you have fabricated against my husband's honour—I will give you nothing—nothing ! I defy you ! ”

“ Oh ho, madam, so you guessed it from the first, did you,” answered he, “ and made up your mind to fight it out ? Have you forgotten, then, what I told you a week ago, that I have in my possession—I have it here—the proof, the damning proof, of what I have told you, in your husband's own handwriting ? Do you suppose that I trusted to his bare word ? No, no ! Here it is, in black and white—his own admission.”

“ Let me look at it.”

She had moved towards him, and he stepped back towards the curtained window to avoid her. “ Gently, gently.

Keep your distance, madam. I am not going to let your nimble fingers touch a document that is worth to me five thousand pounds at least."

"It is worth nothing: I do not believe in its existence. It is just as likely as not to be blank paper, and all this wicked talk a scheme to extort money from a defenceless woman. Let me see it, I say."

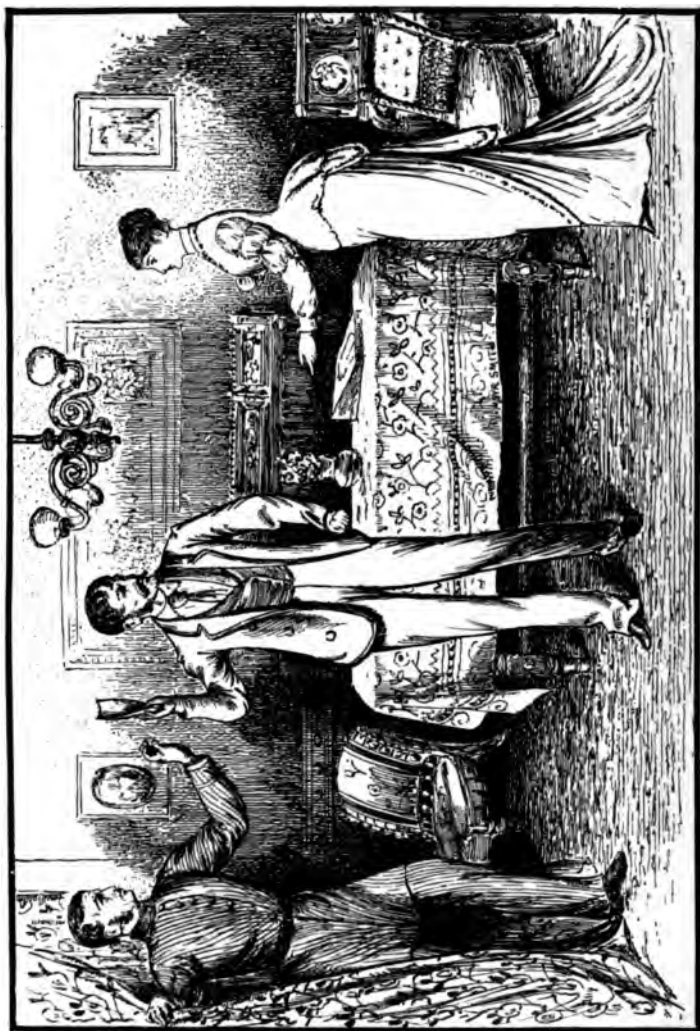
"You shall see it, but at safe distance," replied Blake, still retiring before her.

"That means it is a forgery," answered Maggie boldly.

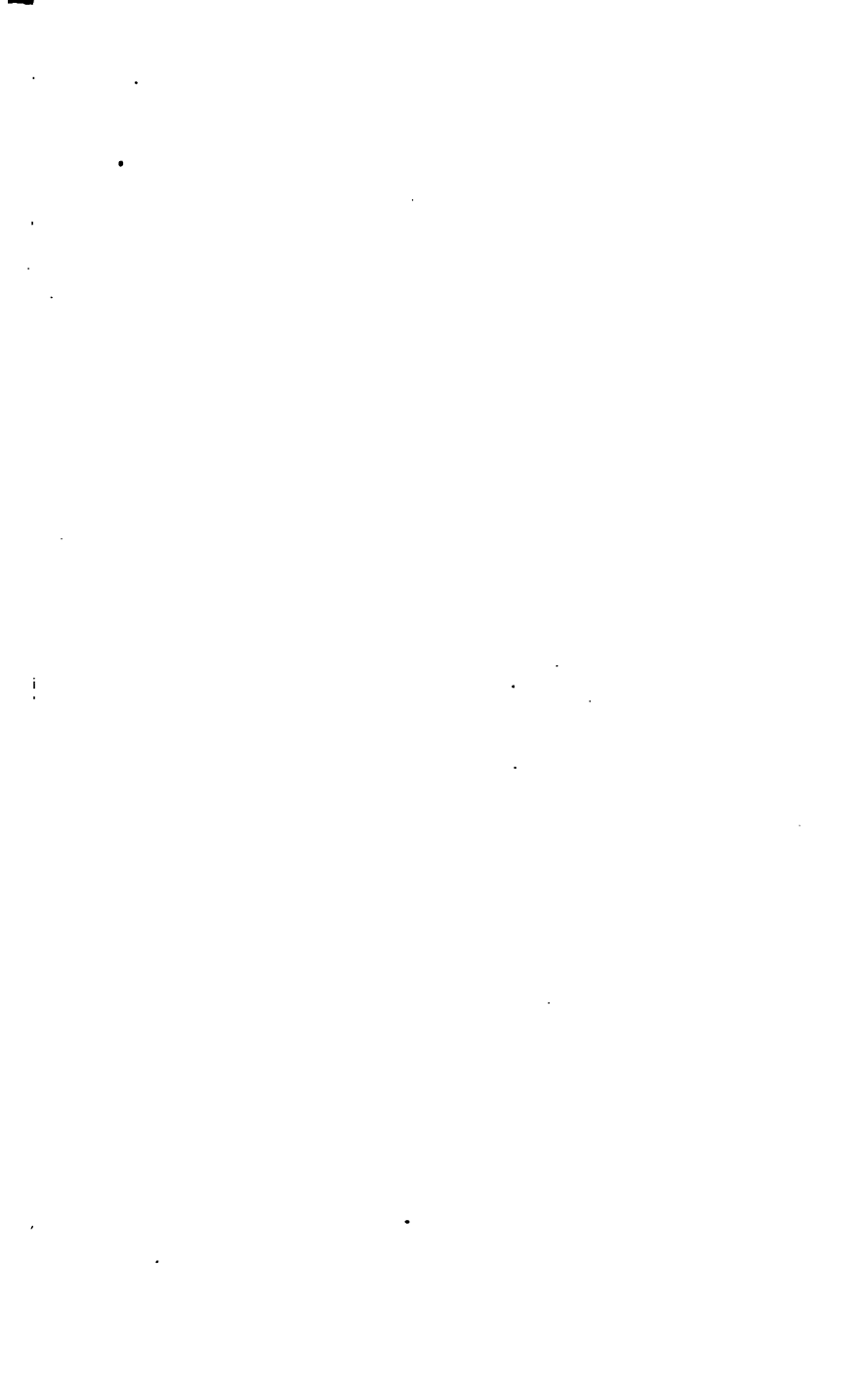
"Forgery or not, madam, it shall never leave my"——

Here the curtains opened behind the speaker, a strong arm stretched over his shoulder, and plucked the paper from his grasp; he turned round with the cry of a wild beast, and found himself face to face, not with John Milbank, as his fears foreboded, but with the inspector of police!

"I will show the document to the lady myself," said Mr Brain.



" Fergery or not, madam, it shall never leave my—"—p. 284



CHAPTER XXXIII.

CHECKMATED.

It would have been difficult for the most skilful of physiognomists to detect the chief among the various passions that convulsed the countenance of Dennis Blake, on finding himself disarmed of the weapon wherewith he had proposed to win so much. For an instant he glared savagely at the inspector, as though resolved, at all hazards, to regain the document of which he had been so unceremoniously dispossessed ; but there was such an unmistakable look of power in the well-built frame of his opponent, as he stood with his hand behind him, and the paper in it, and such an obvious "You had better not," in his resolute features, that he seemed to abandon that idea as hopeless. But the rage in his face remained no less vehement for being baffled ; and mingled with it was a fear that blanched even his dusky cheek. Irresolution, too, had as evidently seized him, as he glanced from one to the other of his two companions, uncertain to which side to attach himself, labouring between the slender hope of yet securing his object, or the immediate gratification of revenge. The former consideration seemed at last to prevail with him, for, after a full minute of troubled thought, he thus broke silence :—

"I hope, Mr Inspector, that you know the world too well to have taken all that I have been saying to Mrs Milbank here for granted. I confess I was putting the screw on a

little more tightly than the circumstances warranted, but that would have been explained all in good time. It is a case, I do assure you, which does not require your intervention at all. Though, I will answer for it, that you shall not have cause to regret your loss of time here. The little affair between myself and this lady may be very well settled out of court, but at the same time, you shall occupy the post of arbitrator—so far as the fee goes—and it shall be a large one."

Mr Brain did not reply, but turned an eye interrogatively towards Maggie, keeping the other, as it were, on guard upon his interlocutor.

"For my part," answered Maggie resolutely, "I wish to enter into no terms whatever with this man, whom I know to be a liar and a villain. I believe no word of what he has been telling me; but that he has founded his whole story upon some scandalous rumour, taking advantage of which, and of my unprotected and miserable condition, he has sought to extort money from me. That paper, I say again, if it be anything—if it be not a mere sham and pretence, with which to crown his infamous scheme—is but a forgery of my poor husband's handwriting, and will be proved so in any court of justice."

"Have I, then, your permission to read it, madam?" inquired the inspector.

There was a melancholy gravity in his face that, to Maggie's eye, forboded ill. There had been points in that long act of accusation to which they had both been listening, that had struck home with something of conviction even to her heart—though it did not waver even now in its allegiance to her husband; her own answers, specially framed though they had been to meet the ears of a third person, had not always, she was conscious, been such as to throw doubt upon Blake's story, and it might well be that the very man she had

invoked for her protection was, in spite of himself, already committed to the other side. Still, all the more reason was there to put entire trust in that little weapon, the time for using which had now arrived; and to give proof of her confidence in John's innocence by daring all.

"Read it, Mr Brain, by all means," cried she, "and read it aloud. Whatever it may say to my husband's prejudice will be false, I know, as the knave who has brought it hither. I have nothing to fear from it, nor, thanks to your presence here, from him."

"Are you mad, woman?—Stop, stop, sir!" broke in Blake, with vehemence, and stretching a hand out, in his excitement, that unintentionally struck against the inspector's chest. The next moment he was staggering to the other end of the parlour, half stunned by a buffet from that official's fist.

"Hands off!" exclaimed Mr Brain, in a warning voice. "I have enough against you already, without your adding assault and battery to the list of your offences.—It is, as you say, madam, very well that we arranged this little plan together beforehand—that I am here to protect you from the violence of a scoundrel who would stick at nothing."

In spite of this rebuff and denunciation, Dennis Blake once more lifted up his voice in earnest appeal to Maggie. "I adjure you, madam, to forbid this man to read that paper, or you will repent it to your dying day."

"Read it, Mr Brain," repeated Maggie steadily, "and aloud, if you will be so good."

"That's easier said than done, ma'am," cried the inspector, who had already unfolded the document. "Why, this villain, this extortioner, has been trading upon absolutely *nothing*! Such a specimen of audacity I have never beheld in all my professional experience! Why, the paper is *blank*!"

"Blank!" echoed Maggie, in a tone of wonder, that needed all her self-command to counterfeit: her heart was as over-

powered with gratitude, as though a miracle had interfered in her husband's favour. The weapon, then, to which she had trusted had *not* failed her—the virtues of her father's darling invention had been proved indeed, in a manner, and with a result, that his wildest fancy could never have pictured. How little, too, could John have thought, when he flattered the old man's whim, and helped to make it a reality, that it should one day be the instrument of his own safety, and of his enemy's confusion!

"Blank!" repeated Blake in a frenzy. "Why, this is witchcraft, devilry! Blank! Why, I have read it every day since the night in which I forced his fingers to write it! Blank! Why, you have changed it yourself. You are in the same boat with this woman and her husband; she has bribed you. Give it me back, give it me back, I say!"

In the fury of his disappointment and despair, he cast himself upon the inspector like a tiger, and strove to drag him to the ground. Some years ago it would have gone hard with the man whom he had thus grappled; but his constitution, which had seemed proof against drink and ruin, had, as sometimes happens, without declension, utterly given way, so that he was but the shell and framework of the man he had been. In two minutes from the commencement of the struggle, it was virtually over; and presently there was a sharp click, and Dennis Blake was sitting breathless in a chair with a pair of handcuffs round his trembling wrists.

"If you were as strong as you are vicious," remarked the inspector, taking out his handkerchief and mopping his forehead, "you would be a very ugly customer indeed. I could have given you a tap with my truncheon, mind you; but that would have been to rob the gallows of its rights."

"She has bribed you," gasped Blake hoarsely.

"Ah, with the money that she should have given *you*, I suppose," chuckled Mr Brain, regarding his prisoner with

much complacency. "You are—you really *are* a specimen, in the way of scoundrels : quite perfection, upon my life !"

"I tell you, this is false imprisonment, and you shall pay for it," continued the other, choked as much with rage as want of breath. "It is on that woman's wrists—as accessory, after the fact, to a murder ; I have said so, and I can prove it—and not on mine, that you should put these things." He held up the manacles as he spoke, and shook them at her in impotent malice.—"Do you think your husband will escape my vengeance, through this device, you jilt, you trickster"—

"Gently, gently," broke in the inspector sternly. "No hard words to any lady in my presence, or I'll gag you !"

"I say that John Milbank has committed murder," continued Blake excitedly—"the murder of his own brother Richard, and that that woman knows it. I accuse her of being his confederate, and I charge you, inspector, to do your duty, without fear or favour, and arrest her as such !"

"I should think you were a sort of gentleman whose sense of duty is most uncommon powerful !" observed Mr Brain, leaning his head aside and scratching it in the excess of his moral approbation. "I don't wonder at the notion of another person's neglect of it should fill your breast with virtuous indignation ; not at all. The *very* finest specimen, upon my honour, of impudence ; no imitation, but the genuine scoundrel, with the true ring about him : brass, from skin to skin."

"I don't care what you say of me—I don't care what you do to me," gasped the wretched man, "only take the charge. I say it's murder, and I can prove it. You're a policeman, and you have no choice but to obey the law."

"I am a policeman, as you say, Mr Dennis Blake," observed Mr Brain coolly, "though, since I am an inspector, it would have been more civil to give me my title ; and, as a policeman, I will just tell you how this case strikes me. I have

heard your story with my own ears ; and some of it I believe, especially that part of it where you acknowledged that you had broken into this house with felonious intentions. I happened to have discovered that underground passage, which, it seems, was your own handiwork, myself, and have, by means of it explored the cellar. There are no 'dead men' there, unless it's an empty bottle or two, which are sometimes called so, nor, in my opinion, have there ever been such."

"It has been taken away, then, and buried elsewhere," put in the other doggedly. "I saw it lying by the stone steps, with my own eyes."

"You have said that already, Dennis Blake ; but when you said it last, you promised that there was the proof to follow. Do you call this white sheet of paper a proof of murder ? It looks to me more like a proof of innocence !"

"It bore John Milbank's confession the last time I looked at it," cried the other vehemently. "You have changed it for another. I say again, this woman has bribed you !"

"That statement is slander," observed Mr Brain quietly, "and uttered in the presence of a witness. However, let me proceed with the matter in hand, which you will find to be still more serious. The tale you tell is a monstrous one, and has evidently been framed to fit the circumstances, which again (at least the chief of them), are of your own making. By your own confession, you broke into this house in quite an unexampled manner. Having done so, and been caught, as you say, in the very act, and foreseeing punishment, although deferred, inevitable, you trump up this strange story. What motive induced Mr Milbank to spare you at the time, of course I cannot guess ; but you have obviously taken advantage of that fact to give the impression that he was afraid of you. The disappearance of his brother, and the malicious rumours prevalent in the town concerning it, have supplied you with materials for this plot, while his own

unexplained absence from home suggested the time for the execution of it. You came here expecting to find Mrs Milbank alone, broken down by her heavy calamity, and a prey to nervous fears—a victim in all respects suitable for your infamous purpose. Instead of that, I am glad to say, you found a sensible and courageous woman, who had already placed her case in the proper hands. I arrest you, Dennis Blake, upon two charges : first, for the commission of the burglary, to which you have yourself confessed ; and secondly, for an attempt to extort money, which I can speak to from the evidence of my own eyes and ears."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR BLAKE'S SUBMISSION.

A MORE disconcerted expression of countenance than was worn by Mr Dennis Blake, as he sat listening to the inspector's words, with bent-down head and with his wrists so much nearer to one another than custom or comfort would have dictated, it would have been hard to imagine. Such an extraordinary case of table-turning was never seen as had just occurred in the little parlour at Rosebank, and, what was still more remarkable, the operator himself, and not the spectators, was the person most astonished by the result. His dogged face, eloquent as it was of rage, and fear, and malice, wore a look of wonder and bewilderment that preponderated over all.

"I should like to speak a word with Mrs Milbank in private," ejaculated he sullenly, when Mr Brain had finished his peroration, and laid his hand upon Blake's shoulder, in sign that he had taken possession of him as his lawful prize.

"I have not a doubt of it," observed the inspector coolly ; "but I shall not permit you to do anything of the kind ; for if you are going to try the game on again of which I suspect you, it is my duty to shield this lady from your designs ; while, if there really is any truth in your late statements, it is still more my duty that nothing should occur in the way of composition of felony. That is a third charge, by the by

—supposing this cock-and-bull story of yours to have any ground at all—that will be urged against you in the proper place. You were ready enough to keep everything dark, remember, upon what you were pleased to call ‘equitable conditions.’ Altogether, Mr Dennis Blake, it seems to me that you are in a pretty considerable hole.”

The extreme depth of this hole, however, could only be appreciated by the person in it ; the arguments of the inspector were incontestable ; but besides, there was this supreme and bitterest conviction in Blake’s breast, that the foe whom he had designed to ruin, and whose destruction he would gladly now have worked, no matter at what cost to himself, was probably at that moment beyond the reach of his malice. There seemed nothing for him but, by an abject submission, to save, if possible, his own skin.

“You can’t compound a felony, Mr Inspector, if there was none to compound, you know,” muttered he sullenly : “it was all gammon from beginning to end.”

“Oh, you admit that, do you ?” answered the other contemptuously. “Well, that will save the lawyers some trouble, at all events. But you’ll find it more difficult to prove your breaking into the cellar was ‘all gammon’ too.”

“I didn’t take anything.”

“That’s not the question, my man, though it is doubtless something that may be urged in mitigation of your crime, and in the proper place : you might just as well say you didn’t get anything by your attempt to extort money out of this poor lady ; it was not through any fault of yours that you failed, as I can witness.”

“With respect to that matter, Mr Brain,” observed Maggie gravely, “I have myself no wish to proceed against this person. I confess that his vile and slanderous story—though not for a single instant did it obtain credence with me—has

given me great distress and pain ; but to punish him would be to punish myself also. I can imagine that so base a creature, finding his case hopeless, and having nothing to gain by an honest confession, would gratify his malignity and spite by repeating in a court of justice, and to as many ears as possible, the same atrocious falsehoods respecting my poor husband which you have just now heard him utter."

"They would give him another year or two for that, however," remarked the inspector parenthetically.

"Still, that would be little satisfaction to me, as compared with its cost. I speak quite plainly, and in this villain's presence, because under no possible circumstances will I hold converse with him again, and that he may understand, once for all, my position in regard to him. Why my husband did not give him up to justice in the first instance"—

"Ah ! why, indeed ?" sneered Blake.

"You had better be quiet, my man," said Mr Brain menacingly. "I know your past almost as well as you do yourself, and I foresee your future much more clearly. If once you leave this room as my prisoner, Dennis Blake, it will be for good and all. You may shoot your little spurt of venom, as this lady suggests, but that will be your only consolation till you die ; for you will be a 'lifer.' I daresay I need not tell *you* what that means."

Blake's dusky cheek turned a shade paler ; but he answered nothing, only moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

"I say," continued Maggie firmly, "that it may be just possible that you may have possessed yourself of some secret connected with my husband's affairs, which has induced him to spare you, and the divulging of which may harm his credit. To save him so much of annoyance or inconvenience, I would willingly overlook your offences ; just as, if your death would serve him ever so slightly, I would willingly see you

hanged. Upon my own account, I have not one shadow of fear of you, nor one grain of pity."

Mr Inspector Brain placed and replaced one of his huge hands softly over the other, as though playing on an invisible concertina ; his head, too, moved in time to Maggie's words ; altogether, he looked the very personification of harmonious but inaudible applause.

"So far as I am concerned, then, Dennis Blake," continued she, "you are free to leave this house, upon the proviso that you never enter it again, nor attempt to address me either by word or letter, nor venture to soil my husband's name by breathing it through your perjured lips. Disobey me in this in the least particular, and the law shall take its course with you from that moment ; and what that course will end in, you have just heard."

"Silence, *silence* ;" exclaimed the inspector warningly, perceiving Blake about to speak. "This is the last chance of getting out of your hole, my man, that you will ever have, and I recommend you not to throw it away. This great piece of good fortune is not only far beyond what you deserve, but I have my doubts whether it is not defeating the ends of justice. A hair in the balance would just now decide me to take you by the collar, and lay you by the heels at the police office, which you would only exchange for the county jail and that, again, for Her Majesty's establishment at Portland. So far as you are concerned, I will go a step farther than this lady, and say that it would be an inexpressible comfort and satisfaction to me to see you there ; so you had better keep a civil tongue in your head, or, since that is probably impossible, be silent. I say, I am not at all sure that I am not overstepping my duty in permitting such an audacious reprobate and villain as you have proved yourself to be, to escape punishment. This lady, it is true, by not appearing against you,

might cause the charge of extorting money to fall to the ground ; but not only have I heard with my own ears your voluntary confession of having committed a burglary under this roof, but I have seen the evidence of the fact with my own eyes. You talk—in his absence—of having some “hold” upon one whom all who know him know to be an honest gentleman ; but that hold (whatever it may be) is as nothing, let me tell you, to the hold I have on you. I have got you as tight as any terrier who has his teeth in a rat’s neck—and, by the Lord Harry, I have a mind to shake you out of your skin ! Still, taking into consideration the circumstances of the case, as respects this lady—and without the least regard to you whatever—and since she has formally declined to prosecute you, I will, for this time, let you go at large. Only, I also have one proviso to make : don’t you stop at Hilton ; don’t remain within ten miles of the beat of Inspector Brain, because you will find the air unhealthy for you. It ain’t often that these bracelets, which become your wrists so well, are unlocked so easily.—Not a word ; not a syllable ; now go.”

Mr Dennis Blake was not a gentleman given to poetic metaphor, or he might have likened himself, on this occasion of his departure, to the month of March, which is said to come in like a lion, but to go out like a lamb. The air of proprietorship which he had assumed on his arrival, had utterly disappeared, and was replaced by one of extreme dejection. He shambled rather than walked out of the parlour, nor did he venture to breathe a syllable, even of thanks, to the inspector for seeing him out of doors. Nay, when he found himself alone, except for the snow-flakes, and journeying homeward to the wretched lodgings that he had, doubtless, calculated upon soon exchanging for more eligible apartments, he did but mutter to himself, in dismal monotone, the reiterated

word "Blank, blank!" in reference, doubtless, to the unexpected aspect of that document upon which he had built so much, and which Mr Brain had considerably returned to him on his departure; moreover, his countenance was that of one who, after he has promised to himself a magnificent prize in the lottery of life, has drawn a blank.

CHAPTER XXXV.

NEWS AT LAST.

THERE has been many a battle gained similar to that after which the conquerer exclaimed : "One more such a victory, and I am undone." And so it was with Maggie, as she sat that night in the parlour at Rosebank, when the ally who had so largely contributed to her enemy's discomfiture had left her, to enjoy her triumph alone. Such another conflict, no matter how signal might be the success attending it, would, she felt, be utterly beyond her strength. Spiritless, prostrate, utterly exhausted with her own exertions—though she had but stood on her defence throughout—she was mistress of the field, and that was all. She had read how largely the element of chance enters into the calculations of war ; how its greatest successes have been attained by a lucky stroke, and how vain would have been the foresight of the most skilful generals, even when the dove-tailing of this and that event with one another has come off beyond all anticipation, had not some mischance, which they have not reckoned on their side at all, befallen their foe : and thus she knew it had been with her in respect to Dennis Blake.

She had calculated on the virtues of the terminable ink to confound her husband's accuser, and on the presence of the inspector of police to inspire him with terror ; and they had not failed her ; but, notwithstanding this good fortune, all would have been fruitless but for the unexpected confession

from Blake's own lips, by which he had been placed, independently of his offence against herself, within the power of the law. Throughout that terrible interview—trying enough had she been alone, but ten times more trying since she had had to weigh every word before she spoke it, with regard to its effect upon her hidden audience, as well as on the man with whom she was face to face—she had borne up to the last, though every nerve was strung to the utmost, and her very blood had stood stagnant more than once; but now that it was over, it seemed that the victory had been purchased at the cost of life itself. In her complete and utter prostration, she could hardly believe that she was the self-same being who had endured the experience of the last two hours, and never shown—but once—a sign of that weakness which she had felt in every fibre, and the exhibition of which would have been ruin. The thought of her husband's peril had alone sustained her, and now the peril was past, her strength departed with it.

Yes; the peril was past, at all events for the present; but the Thing that had caused the peril—alas, no longer Nameless—had not passed; could never do so, as it seemed to her, but must remain before her eyes continually, a worse than Belshazzar's warning, since it was written in letters of blood. That much of Dennis Blake's narrative was true she could have no doubt: no more doubt than Inspector Brain would have had, had it not been for that impotent and baseless finale to which all had led, but which had never, of course, for an instant imposed upon herself.

Without doubt, Blake had done the things he said he had done—indeed, they were sufficiently discreditable to be genuine—and it was even difficult for her to refuse credence to much that he had said of others. She perfectly well remembered—notwithstanding that she had so stoutly denied it—imitating, at Richard Milbank's request, the autograph of her present husband. Richard had been praising her skill in caligraphy

and other arts of penmanship, and had playfully asked her to give examples of it, which she had very readily done ; and it was now brought home to her mind that Richard had on that one occasion pushed something before her with a "Suppose that this were a cheque, for instance," and that she had signed it in John's name. This might have been that bill for a thousand pounds. That she believed it, indeed, was certain, since it seemed to reveal to her, with the suddenness of the rise of a stage-curtain, the real character and object of the wretched man on whom she had once thrown away her love.

The representations of her father and her friends—of those who had known Richard best, and better far than she, an inexperienced girl, could possibly have known him—had gone for nothing, or even made her more kind to his faults, more blind to his vices and his selfishness ; and through the years that had intervened, though she had got to have a more sober and reasonable estimate of human affairs, and with it, insensibly, of Richard's character, she had still regarded him with tender charity : he had been in her eyes, if not, indeed, "more sinned against than sinning," still "no one's enemy but his own ;" but now that delusion had found its end. A man might even forge his brother's name, and yet leave something to be urged in extenuation ; but to make an innocent girl, whom he professed to love, the unconscious instrument of his crime, was the act of a villain. That Maggie herself had been the victim of the device, did not affect the matter, for if, on the one hand, she might have felt more indignation on another's account than on her own, on the other hand, the remembrance of how much she had loved this man, how passionately she had clung to him, how bitterly she had regretted him, filled up the scale, and made his trespass heavy indeed.

And as he sank, so rose, in Maggie's eyes, his brother John. For years, nay, for all his life, save since she had been his

wife, she had done him wrong, and all for Richard's sake. His very virtues, because they had contrasted so with the other's defects, had been obnoxious to her; and if she had not applauded those who sneered at them she had not rebuked them. Of his love for her she had been unconscious, but it almost seemed to her now that she must have been wilfully blind to it. What a life of placid happiness, had she perceived that love, acknowledged it, reciprocated it, in those early days, might have been hers! nay, might have been *his*—whose wholesome heart her conduct had changed to gall: not the gall of bitterness, for of that he was incapable, but of disappointment, of humiliation, of despair. What a present might he have been enjoying; what a past might he have had to look back upon; what a future might be awaiting him!

But *Now!* Now she was sitting alone, a deserted wife, and John was a wanderer and an exile, she knew not where, nor why! She might know *Why*, indeed, if she pleased: she might learn how much was true, how much was false, of Blake's dark tale, by the mere unfolding of the paper that lay hidden in her bosom; but that was not to be opened till he was dead, or until she had lost her faith in him. And she had not lost faith. Lost? Nay, she had gained faith. For if she had not believed ill of him, even in her blindness to his gifts of good, was it likely that she should do so now that her eyes were opened to them, because this Dennis Blake accused him of ill-doing!

She did not, and she never would. Should John return to her to-morrow, or in ten years' time, or in twenty, it would be all the same. "Here is your paper, still untouched, dear husband," she would say; "nor do I wish to hear one word of what it tells, unless you wish to speak it."

That resolve was firm within her, and to it she clung; but the days crept miserably by, nevertheless, and the desolate, watchful nights lagged wearily indeed. There is one misery,

and perhaps only one in the long category of human ills, to which the mind cannot shape itself, or get accustomed, namely, the torture of suspense. What we know, and can see the end of, though that end be desolation and blank death—the loss of all (for it seems all) we love—can, in the end, be borne.

Time, though we so passionately deny its power to do so, does heal that wound ; the cure is slow, perhaps ; it may take years, and every year to us a century ; and now and again the wound, touched by some thoughtless hand, or touched by none—the revisiting a once-loved scene, a sound remembered, the scent of a living flower, or the sight of a dead one—any one of these may cause it to bleed afresh, as on the first day of loss ; yet the cure is certain.

But for Suspense there is no cure, no intermission, no relief. The sense of loss, however great and overwhelming, is occasionally forgotten ; the mind escapes from it, and wanders free, or sinks exhausted with its burden into slumber. Occupation is more or less *possible* to us ; the voice of genius can pierce through the mists of time, and absorb us for a little in its magic words ; if music cannot charm us from our melancholy, it can soften it, for it is the fountain of tears : but Suspense has no such assuagements. Books cannot rivet its eye, nor music its ear. It resents such would-be alleviations, as the sick babe in pain resents its nurse's lullabies. They hinder it from its one function and employment, which is to watch ; to listen ; to anticipate the evil that is about to fall, it knows not whence, and fulfil the haunting presage of Ruin.

It is scarcely too much to say that her missing husband was never out of Maggie's thoughts, since the very dreams from which she woke to a new day of miserable expectancy, were filled with him. Whatever she beheld reminded her of him—as, indeed, well it might, for she persisted in remaining at Rosebank, despite the persuasions of her friends.

"Suppose he were to return to-night, to-morrow, and find me gone—even but to my father's house," was her feverish fear, "and thereby miss his solace!" Nay, even the very words that others spoke to her, though studiously shaped to avoid it, would recall him to her memory.

"You will get quite grey, my darling, moping here alone," her father had smilingly said to her on one occasion, striving to win her from her loneliness; but she only shook her head, and straightway pictured to herself her missing dear one, whose brown locks had indeed turned grey, and in whose heart, consumed she knew not by what anguish, youth had died out for ever!

Thus six weeks or so of winter passed away—a winter so unusually severe that it froze the rapid river that ran by the town, yet could not numb her sense of loss, nor cool her fever of expectancy—and then came Christmas: the hallowed time of reconciliation and reunion; when home seems more like home than at other seasons, and wife and husband sit beside the hearth with a stronger sense than common of their unity.

But it was not so with her. She listened, as did other wives, for her husband's footstep, but it was not, like them, with gladsome expectation, nor even with expiring hope—for hope was dead; and it came, or seemed to come, a thousand times to the cottage door, but never nearer, for it was but the wanton wind; and a thousand times his fingers tapped, or seemed to tap, at the closed panes, but it was but the pitiless snow and hail that mocked her; and a thousand times at night she heard, or seemed to hear, his breathing on the vacant pillow: and so she passed her Christmas. Her father came, bringing little Willie with him; but even in that there was no comfort yet: her eyes would rest upon the kind old man, who was so good to her, and who had loved her all his life, and never more (she knew) than now; but her thoughts

were far away in aimless search of him she yearned for ; or she would gaze upon the child at play, yet mark him not, or, if she marked him, lift her finger up for silence. Silence for the step that never came.

"At last the leaden winged year drew to its close ; and the morning of New Year's Eve broke in upon her loneliness in sheets of sleet and snow. She was sitting at her untasted breakfast, listening as usual, to the stormful sounds without, when suddenly she heard the front door opened. Pale and trembling, she started to her feet, for the hour was too early for a visit from her father, and no one save himself and her husband was wont to enter the cottage without ringing. But the next moment she heard the stamping of feet and scraping of shoes, whereupon that little ray of hope, like all preceding rays, at once departed, and was quenched in darkness ; for John would never have stopped in the lobby though snow environed him from head to heel, she knew, but would have come right on into her beloved presence. In this case, indeed, there was still more delay, for she heard Mrs Morden summoned and their voices in hushed converse. The visitors, in fact, were her father and Mr Linch, and she had but to cast one look on their earnest faces, as they entered the room, to know that they were the bearers of grave tidings.

"O father ! you have news of John !" cried she.

"Yes, Maggie," answered the old man, in broken tones ;
"there is news ; and alas, bad news,"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE APPOINTED TIME.

BAD news? Of course there was. Who is it that has reached middle life, and been so fortunate as never to have experienced that moment when he has been called aside, it may be from some scene of pleasure, or from one, at least, wherein his "bosom's lord sat lightly on its throne," by some unwilling messenger of woe! Whether it be friend or servant, there is no mistaking the nature of his errand. Before the "Oh sir, come home at once!" of the one, or the "Friend, I am sorry to bring you evil tidings," of the other, is spoken, we know that Fate has done us some ill turn. And if this be so on ordinary occasions, how much more when we have reason to fear her malice! That bad news had come respecting John, Maggie was as well aware as they who brought it; she only dared to hope that it was not the worst. Nay, beyond that deep, in her case, lay a lower deep, for she knew not what that worst might be.

"A letter came this morning, Maggie," said Mr Linch, since her father, after feeling blindly about him for a chair, had sat him down and remained silent, as though unequal to the task he had proposed to himself—"a letter from shipboard."

"From John? Oh, give it me!"

"No; not from John. It is from the captain of the ship

in which John sailed, it seems from Liverpool, some three weeks ago."

"So late as that!" ejaculated Maggie not without thankfulness. He had not been safe, then, when Blake had threatened him, but was still in England. Thank Heaven, he had not known his risk!

"Yes; he grew worse, it appears, after he had left home—much worse—and was not able to go on board. Nor, when he did go, was he fit to bear the voyage."

"Give me the letter!" cried she, rising suddenly, and tottering towards them.

"One moment, dear Maggie; for your father's sake and little Willie's, be calm. God's way is right, whatever way He wills; and He who permits the blow can give the balm."

"Dead, dead, dead!" cried Maggie wildly; and she would have fallen on the floor, but that the lawyer caught her in his arms. She lay in a dead faint upon the sofa; yet, when her father's trembling fingers untied the collar about her neck, and would have loosened her gown about her bosom, she sat up like a corpse revived by a miracle. "The paper, the paper!" cried she, remembering the sacred trust that lay there.

"Do you mean the letter, darling?"

"Yes, yes; the letter." Oh, thanks to Heaven, even in that hour, when Heaven itself had made her desolate, that his secret was still safe and in her keeping! They put the letter into her hand, but she could not read it; not, alas! for tears—what would she not have given for tears!—but because the face she should never more behold in life obscured it.

So the lawyer read it to her. It was a formal communication enough, though couched in words of kind consideration. The captain had written, as was his duty, to state that his passenger, John Milbank, an invalid from the first, had died

in mid-passage between Liverpool and New York. It was the sick man's wish that the news of his decease should be sent to Mr Thorne, at Hilton ; his widow, he had said, would understand why no direct message had been sent to her ; but there was a lock of hair enclosed, sealed up by the dying man himself, which was for her own hand.

Maggie took the little packet eagerly, and clasped it close, for was there not a secret also in that lock of snow ? "Is that all ?" she whispered.

"Yes ; that was all. The captain had written that she would understand," said Mr Linch, not without a touch, not, indeed, of curiosity, but of interrogation in his tone.

"Yes, yes ; I do understand," answered she. "It is better so." Both marvelled in their own minds, doubtless, to hear her answer thus, but forbore to question further. "Dead, dead, dead !" murmured she again, "and I had only just learned to love him !"

"He loved *you*, darling, I am sure," said her father simply ; "and, if he sees you now, this anguish must needs pain him : for his sake, then, take comfort."

"And remember, Maggie," put in Mr Linch, not very appositely, "he is gone where no sorrow can touch him more, and, therefore, we ought not to grieve for him."

They said, indeed, what they could, those two, to comfort her, but

*"Common is the commonplace,
And vacant chaff well meant for grain."*

—There was no comfort for her. She sat with one hand pressed on her two treasures, the old and new one, and with her heated eyes fixed on the floor, revolving nothing. A sense—not numbed, alas ! but dull—of utter lack and loneliness, possessed her wholly : the world seemed emptied of all

life and love, and heaven a void beyond it. Yet it was not so ; for presently a little hand was placed in hers, and a little mouth lifted up to kiss her cheek ; and at that potent touch, and at those broken tones, unmeaning as any wizard's spell, but with ten times its magic, the succour came, and she bent down on little Willie's neck dissolved in tears.

"That was a good thought of yours, to bring the child," whispered Mrs Morden to the engraver approvingly ; "and I fetched him in, you see, at the very nick of time."

The relief, indeed, to Maggie's overburdened heart was instantaneous, and in a little while her strength began to rally, and she was able to listen to what was said to her.

"You will forgive me for mentioning the matter at such a time," said Mr Linch, in his professional tones, "but it is my duty to inform you—in case you may not be aware of the circumstance—of the existence of a certain document in your husband's desk."

In an instant, her grief was put aside, her desolation forgotten, and every nerve and sense became alive to defend, not her husband, indeed, but his memory.

"There is nothing there," said she, in a calm, resolute voice, "except some private letters. Has he ever told you that there was ?"

"Indeed he has," answered the lawyer, with considerable anxiety in his manner. "And if you have not made a thorough search, Mrs Milbank, I must entreat you to permit me to do so. The matter is pressing, not only through the time that has elapsed since your husband's decease, but because, while the fate of Mr Richard Milbank is still uncertain, there will be serious difficulty in case the document should be mislaid or lost"——

"Were you yourself made acquainted with its contents ?" gasped Maggie, her thoughts fixed solely upon the paper that

she had taken from the desk, and unable to grasp the importance of any other.

"Most certainly I was. I have remonstrated more than once with poor Mr John on his keeping in such a place of custody a document so momentous. I speak, of course, madam, of your late husband's will, which I drew up myself, in accordance with his instructions, and for which I feel in some sort personally responsible. It would set my mind at ease—which, I confess, is troubled by what you have just told me—if you would permit me to satisfy myself"——

Maggie pointed assentingly towards the desk, to which the lawyer flew at once, like a greyhound slipped from the leash. She was relieved to find that John had not made this man his confidant, but only herself. She would have something in common yet with her dead husband, that no other soul should share.

"Thank Heaven, I have found the will!" cried Mr Linch presently, "without which we could scarcely have moved a step." Then, as if conscious how unbefitting was a tone of triumph at such a moment, he added: "Riches, it is true, cannot purchase comfort; but poverty, believe me, has always power, when the first shock is over, to make our woe more bitter."

If Maggie heard, she did not understand his words: her eyes were riveted on the child, who had toddled away to the window, and was playing at "Bopeep" in the curtains that had once concealed the form of Mr Inspector Brain.

"Your daughter is a widow indeed, Thorne," whispered the lawyer; "she cares not whether she has been left all or nothing."

"Yes; I always said John would make the best of husbands, and so it turned out," answered the engraver softly. "She hears nothing that we say, she sees nothing that goes on

before her, not even little Willie yonder. Her thoughts are with the dead."

"Don't you think, Thorne, if I were to read the will, or at least state the terms of it, it would do her good—distract her mind, poor soul?"

The engraver shook his head; he had himself known what it is to love and lose what seems our all. "Oh no!" he answered.—"Maggie, darling—Maggie—shall we stay here, or shall we go, and leave you to yourself? We wish to do what is best, and most to your mind."

He rose and kissed her; the daughter who, when she was but an infant, had been his comfort under the severest woe that can wring a man's heart; the daughter who, as she grew up, had gladdened him with her beauty, her diligence, her wisdom (save only on one point), her skill, her sympathy; the daughter who had made her choice at last in obedience to his will, and whose prosperous and peaceful life, since then, had been the crowning happiness of his old age; the daughter whom it was *his* turn to comfort now.

"Yes, yes; I have *you* left, I know, dearest," sighed she, as if in answer to his caresses. "Forgive me, father, if I seemed to have forgotten it."

"Does my being here soothe you, Maggie; or would you rather, for the present, be alone with your grief? Do not fear to speak the truth; I shall not be hurt."

"I would rather be alone, father."

"Then it shall be so, darling. Shall we take the child with us?"

"No; please to leave the child."

Her plaintive tenderness had itself something childlike about it which moved both her visitors; and they left her without remonstrance, as she desired. Then she took down an ancient Bible, clasped, and with large pictures in it, which

was Willie's delight, but only shown to him on high and rare occasions, when he had been "good for ever so long," and laid it down upon the floor before him ; and having thus insured his silence and attention for some time to come, she locked the parlour-door, and sat her down, and drew forth the sealed packet from her bosom—for the time had come at last for her to read it.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CAIN AND ABEL.

READER, has it ever been your cruel duty to open the desk of a dead friend, or, worse, of a beloved son who has been taken from you in his manhood, and to read the records hitherto reserved for his own eyes? He is in heaven, with the angels: you have no doubt of that; and yet, it may be, there will be something—you know not what—some revelation of his shortcomings awaiting you, which you would gladly have been spared. It can prove him no worse than others; nay, you know him to have been better; but, at such a time, any evidence of his weakness will, you feel, jar sadly on your tender regrets, and put the green wound of loss to torture.

So was it with poor Maggie, as she held that packet in her hand, and broke its seal with trembling fingers. Nay, her state was far more pitiable, for proof of "shortcoming" and "weakness" there needs must be, by the necessity of the case—with her the question was, "What worse?" Oh, why need it be answered? Why not leave all untold till the Great Day when every secret shall be disclosed to the All-Merciful? Because her husband himself had willed it otherwise—"For my wife: to be opened when I am dead," was the sentence beneath her eyes; and he *was* dead; and, above all things, she must do his bidding.

John Milbank's hand had been a good, but clerkly one,

characteristic—as those would say who see a significance in such matters—of his own orderly and undemonstrative nature; but the writing which now met Maggie's gaze was hurried and uneven, as though the fingers that had held the pen had struggled to keep pace with the winged thought in vain, and caught but half its meaning. There were blots and dashes; but, like the lesson which the schoolboy knows by heart and writes at speed, there was not a single space to mark the pause made by Reflection.

“Shall I be dead, I wonder,” it began, “or only dead to you, dear Maggie, when your eyes first light upon these words? Oh, dead, I hope, and so beyond your hate; for if I live, no matter though the seas should be between us, and half this woful world, I should feel, I know, the sting of your revilings, the barb of your abhorrence and contempt. They are not my due, I call that God to witness in whose dread presence I shall stand and tell the tale that now I tell to you; and yet they will be mine when I have told it. I see your shudder of disgust and loathing, and feel myself an outcast from your heart, condemned already unjustly, though not unheard. Oh, what a life has mine been!—if I can call it mine, since nowhere can I take it up and find it dissociated with your own—how full of melancholy vain regrets, and hopeless longings and despair! Surely, surely, beyond the grave I yearn for there must be peace at last, though heaven there cannot be, since you are parted from me! Pity me, pity me, a little, Maggie, before you shall have read on, and reached what must needs quench all pity.”

His written prayer was answered, for Maggie's tears were falling in a rain of pity, that blotted out his words, till she could read no more, but sat bowed down in silence, save for the rustling of the pictured leaves of the great book, as the

child turned them hither and thither without a plan, and babbled his content. Then once more she read on.

"From my earliest days I loved you, when we were children both, and Richard was a child, whose wayward tempers pleased you even then far better than my poor devotion. I was shy and silent, and had nothing to attract your love; while he—he had but to smile—nay, only not to frown—and all our little world was at his feet. I felt how inferior I was to him—it was impossible, indeed, not to do so, since my uncle, Mrs Morden, and every one with whom I was brought into contact, made me feel it—yet, as I honestly believe, without envy; for I loved Richard myself, and envied him only one thing in the world—your love.

"We grew up, and still I loved him, did my best to give him pleasure, to shield his faults, and to extenuate them with my uncle. If a grain of bitterness was in my heart, I knew it not; it had not sprung up into the green blade of jealousy. There was a glamour about the lad that blinded me, like all the rest. I did not dream, what I now know, that all I did was done in thankless service to a worthless client. That jars upon you, Maggie; I feel it as I write; yet I must speak the truth, as I *have* spoken it, perchance, by this time, before a more impartial judge than you. I am not defending myself; the man who does so has some hope of clearance, of forgiveness, or of remission of punishment; and I have no such hope. I shall, for certain, never see you, hear you, touch you more: the desolation of that thought is unspeakable; it overwhelms me utterly, and but that I have passed my word to you to wait Heaven's own good time to die, I would end all this moment. I am not defending myself, but I have left a memory upon earth, from which I would fain wipe an undeserved stain; and to be just to it, I must speak truth, Maggie.

“By the time that I had come to man’s estate, it was understood—indeed, my uncle told me so with his own lips, not knowing the pain he caused me (though, if he had known, he would have told me still)—that you were one day to be Richard’s bride ; and from that moment I strove to put you from my heart, to live my life without that hope which was the breath of it—to forget you ; to forsake you. Uncle Matthew knew about it. I besought him, upon my knees, to let me go elsewhere, away from Hilton, not to doom me to be the spectator of Richard’s triumph. But I was useful to him in his trade, for which my brother had no aptitude, and he refused to let me go. I do not blame him ; I blame none but one. The old man knew not what it was to love, or, at least, to love like me. ‘Take some other girl,’ said he, ‘and she will cure your itch for this one.’ It would have been good advice to most men of my age ; but to me it was useless. I had no eyes for other girls but you, though you were blind to me. If you had not been so, you must have noticed how I shrank from your society, avoided the temptation of your presence, and when I could not avoid, resisted it. It was to lead my mind away from you, quite as much as through any natural diligence of my own, that I applied myself to business, and showed no fancy for the pleasures that attracted others of my years. There was, it seemed, but one pleasure in life for me—the right to call you mine, and that Fate had denied me. Yet not for a single instant did the idea occur to me of usurping Richard’s place : not because it was impossible to do so (although I knew it was so), but because I had so reverent a regard for the object of my brother’s love. It would have been bliss even to think of you as mine—I dreamt of it sometimes, when Heaven seemed to have sent the dream, and Hell the waking—but I never permitted myself to do so. You were sacred from me—an adored, but forbidden thing. It might

have been so to the end, perhaps, had not Richard himself proved base. He had won you, and for all I knew up to that time, was worthy of you ; he had not, indeed, that reverence for you which I had, and wore that gracious prize—your love—as lightly as the flower in his button-hole. But that was his way—a way that pleased you well, and therefore was the right one. I was very humble, and confessed my way the wrong ; and if I could not wish him joy, I wished Richard no harm, and certainly not the greatest harm of all—that he should lose you. I knew he drank and gamed, but was content, for your sake and for his, to deem such errors but spots upon the surface, blots of youth, which time would cleanse. I did not judge him by myself, who had no taste for cards nor wine, and therefore was not tempted. But a day came when perforce my eyes were opened, and I saw clearly what this Richard was. You have heard how, when my uncle was on his deathbed, or supposed to be so, some thief, disguised—pistol in hand—compelled him to set his name beneath some bond. A cowardly and cruel deed in any man, but in one to whom he had been benefactor, a crime unparalleled for baseness and for greed. Men said, indeed, that it was Richard, but I, for one, denied it, as you know. It could not be, for Richard was as the apple of his eye, whose trespass he had forgiven a score of times, and to whom he had left all he loved on earth—his gold. Yet it *was* Richard. Uncle Matthew told me so with his own lips an hour before his death.

“‘I have no hopes of the wild lad,’ he said, ‘unless Maggie Thorne should wed him ; yet because I loved him once, I have given him one chance, which, if any grain of grace is left in him, he cannot miss. If the remembrance of his old uncle shall induce him only to see my body put in earth, he shall still go shares with you, John, in what I have to leave.’

"I think the old man meant me to give him warning, and I did so ; but I was sorely tempted to be silent, not, Heaven knows ! that I coveted my brother's portion, but, because, if he was poor, that might have been an obstacle to his marriage—at all events, for the present, and I was already bent upon deferring, and, if possible, preventing it. Even yet, I swear, I never thought of substituting myself for him, but only of saving you from such a mate. It seemed so horrible that my uncle, who had such good cause to know how vile he was, should have thought of Richard only, not of you. He had no hopes of him, he had said, unless Maggie Thorne should become his wife. But what hopes, if that happened, thought I, could there be for Maggie Thorne !

"You know on what sort of terms we brothers lived together here at Rosebank, and who it was that led the other a dog's life. Well, I bore all that. It was nothing, or next to nothing, compared with what I suffered when I thought of the life he would one day lead *you*. Never shall I forget the hour when I first found out—what was a well-worn jest with his gay companions—that he was faithless to you. That seemed to me—who was faithful to you without cause—a heinous crime and blasphemy. Not you yourself, had it come to your own ears, could have resented it with a greater indignation. I had long known that he was unworthy of you ; that not one of your many virtues had any reflection in him ; but I had hitherto believed that at least your love for him was reciprocated. But now I felt how hard, indeed, it was that Richard, who could be happy with another, should become your husband, while I, who had no happiness save in you, should live my life alone. For the first time the thought of supplanting him was sown within me, and though I strove to tread it down, it grew and grew. It was not without a struggle even that I compelled myself to keep silence respecting your rival ; the temptation to inform you, in some private

manner, of Richard's infidelity—which I knew would cool your passion for him, and perhaps make you read him aright in other respects—was strong within me ; yet I withstood it. I could no longer persuade myself that in making such a revelation I should be only actuated by the wish to save and serve you ; I knew that 'self' would be my object, and I shrank from the baseness of building my future home upon the wreck of Richard's. A circumstance, however, now took place which dissipated all my scruples. Dennis Blake has doubtless told you of it : I allude to my brother's forgery of the thousand-pound bill. I redeemed it, I confess, with the vague intention of holding it over him *in terrorem*—of compelling him to leave the town and you ; but when I found, from his own lips, that he had made you the innocent instrument of his crime, I swore to myself that you should never wed with such a villain. The letter which Richard left behind him was written at my dictation, and under the threat of immediate prosecution : he had no choice but to accept my terms. I gave him a hundred pounds—the last I had in the world—and he left Rosebank, promising that he would never return thither, or claim you for his wife. That very night, within two hours of his departure, he did return—to meet his death."

A mist, not of tears, here fell on Maggie's eyes ; her whole frame shook ; a noise was in her ears of dreadful blows, and of cries that grew fainter and fainter.

"Mamma, mamma ! 'ook, 'ook !" little Willie was dragging at her skirts, and pointing to his favourite illustration that lay open on the carpet—" 'ook at naughty man !"

She looked mechanically, then turned away with a quick shudder : it was Cain slaying Abel !

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HOW IT HAPPENED.

"Do you still hear me, Maggie, or have I already said so much you cannot listen to more? Have patience with me, and hear all: it is but fair; for though Richard be dead, *I* am dead also. Put yourself in my place, in that hour of triumph, when, as I thought, I had swept Richard from your path for ever; *your* path, I say, not mine, for it was your safety, and not the far-off possibility of my own success with you, that made me happy! He was gone! His power for evil over you was past! He could now never drag you down with the weight of his grossness and his vices! And it was I who had saved you!

"It was four in the morning, yet I had not gone to bed, but was in the sitting-room, debating with myself what was to be done in the morning; how I should simulate ignorance of my brother's intention to leave home when I took his letter to your father's house, picturing to myself how you would receive the news—when I heard the front door open, and his uneven steps in the passage. I knew at once that he had seen Dennis Blake and learned all. My having cashed the forged bill was, in effect, an acknowledgment of its authenticity, and had placed Richard out of my power. It seemed to me, who guessed what Fate had in store for me, that the supreme misery of that moment—in which I beheld you once again his slave—could never be surpassed. 'So, so, my model brother!' were his first mocking words, 'you are not

cock-of-the-walk yet, it seems, though you have paid so large a sum for the place.'

"He had been drinking deeply, and his cheeks were flushed and his eyes bloodshot. As he staggered up to me, and snapped his fingers insolently in my face, it would have been hard, even for you, to have seen any good looks in him. It was plain enough, doubtless, even to his drunken gaze, that *I* saw none; for when I answered nothing, he added:

"Ah, you are not pleased, it seems, to see me back again, whom you thought to have got rid of so cleverly!"

"I have your promise still," said I.

"My promise? Yes; you have got that, and much good may it do you. You have also your own bill for—a thousand pounds. It's *her* handwriting, man, though it pretends to be yours; *your* name, in *her* handwriting. Why, *that* must be worth a thousand pounds to you, since you love her so!"

"Why, if I had killed him *then*, woman, if I had struck him down while he was saying such words as those, and killed him, it would not have been murder! I only answered, however:

"You are mistaken, Richard. I can produce that bill in court, even yet, though I *have* cashed it, and bring the forgery home to you; and I will!"

"Not you," answered he contemptuously; "you poor, soft-hearted, love-sick fool, not you! you would never dare to do it! And if you did, who would believe you? Do you suppose that Maggie would go against her faithful Richard—her husband that is to be? aye, and is *soon* to be! You have held your cards a little too low, brother John, and I have looked over them. You have wanted her for yourself (as I once told you) all along; but just within these last few hours—come, confess it—you have flattered yourself that you were going to win her. Instead of that, she will be mine—*mine*! Congratulate me! Let us have something to drink her health

in. The wine is out; I will go down to the cellar, and get a bottle.'

"'You have drunk enough,' said I, 'more than enough; and I have got something to say to you that it is necessary you should understand.'

"'Something about Maggie, eh?' chuckled he with a vile grin.

"'Yes.'

"'There will be lots of time for that, my good fellow; we will talk of her while we toast her. And in a week or two, when we shall be married and happy—I don't know for how long; it is quite likely I may tire of her: my little Alice is very much to my taste, I own; and then there may be a divorce, perhaps, and you may marry her after all; however——

"'Where was I? I say, when I and Maggie are Darby and Joan together, we will talk of *you*. If she annoys me, I shall say: 'Why didn't you marry John, you pretty fool? He would have let you have your own way, which, as the case now is, you haven't got.' When conversation languishes, our model John will be quite a topic.—Come, what shall be our liquor? I have had enough, you say, and perhaps I have, of brandy—let it be champagne, then.'

"'You shall drink no more to-night, Richard.'

"'But he ran by me, before I could stop him, and down the cellar-stairs; I snatched up a candle and followed him to the top of them. He knew his way to every bin blindfold, and had already a champagne bottle in his hand, and was turning to come up again.

"'That wine,' cried I, 'is mine, not yours; and you shall not drink it.'

"'It was true enough. Half only of what my uncle had left was his, and he had already had three-fourths of everything. I don't rightly know why I was so determined about

the wine; whether I really wished to work upon his fears once more, while he was still sober enough to listen to me, or whether my patience had been taxed beyond its powers, and I was fixed to exact my rights at last; but I was resolved that he should drink no more that night.

“‘Not drink!’ cried he contemptuously: ‘I shall drink what I please, and, what is more, Maggie shall drink also. There is nothing that a woman will not learn of the man she loves; and nothing, if he neglects her, so likely for her to take to as liquor. How it will shock our model John, our temperance brother-in-law, who had such a high opinion of us—— You had best let me pass.’

“‘Not with that wine,’ cried I. He had tumbled half-way up the stairs by this time, and I had come down a few steps, and stood there barring the way. For all his cold, contemptuous talk, I think he had been furious against me all along; and seeing me quite resolved to balk him of his whim, and being passionately scornful of the man who had been his slave so long, and borne so much, he suddenly lost all control of himself. ‘Take that, then,’ cried he, and made at me with the bottle.

“I struck out in self-defence—I swear it—with my fist, and he fell backwards down the steps, and on to the cellar floor. So little force had I employed, that the candle in my other hand—the right—was not put out. I ran down the steps to help him; but he was past all help. He had fallen head foremost upon the stones, and never moaned nor moved. *I, his brother, had killed him!* That was my first thought, Maggie; and my second, if that can be called so which was a part of my first, and suggested by it, was, *And I had lost you for ever.*

“It would have been the natural course, but for that circumstance (as it was unquestionably the safe and prudent one), to have at once roused our little household, and



" ' Take that, then,' cried he, and made at me with the bottle."—p. 322

explained what had occurred. I had done nothing, in the eye of the law, for which I had not, if not a complete defence, at least an ample palliation ; moreover, it was the height of rashness to hide the matter, since, if it did come to be known, the concealment of it must needs suggest my guilt. There was apparently no choice between the two courses of action : the one was so safe and the other was so fraught with peril. Yet, for your sake—no ! I will be frank here, as elsewhere ; it was not for your sake, though the thought of your wretchedness, if this thing should come to be told you, weighed with me too ;—for my own sake, as respected you, I resolved—it was but a flash of thought, but it shaped my future—to confess nothing, and let matters take their chance. I ran up those fatal steps, locked the cellar-door, and thrust the key underneath it : I hoped to hear it ring upon the stones beneath, but it did not do so ; it lodged upon the top step. That little circumstance might, I knew, be fatal to me, for how could Richard have come by his end, with the key *there* ? But it was too late to think of that now. By my own act, I had rendered explanation impossible ; henceforth, there was nothing for me but duplicity and dissimulation. What mattered *that* (you are perhaps saying), to one who had imbued his hands in his brother's blood ? Yet, pity me, pity me a little, Maggie, for you were the innocent cause of all !”

And she did pity him, not a little only, but from the bottom of her faithful heart. “*Mamma not ky,*” besought little Willie, leaving his pictured treasures to tug at her gown ; but the touch of his baby fingers was powerless to help her now : his handsome upturned face and lustrous eyes reminded her of his father, and gave her a new torture. She pitied her husband, and yet she could not forgive him : not by reason of his crime, for she acquitted him of all crime, but because

of what happened afterwards. How could he, *could* he have spoken to her of love, knowing what he had done, and by what means he had been left free to win her ?

"I will not harrow up your soul by a description of how I passed that night, waiting for the dawn that was to bring dismay to all, and to one despair. I dinted my bed to make believe that I had slept in it, but sleep not only then, but for many a night to come, was a stranger to my eyes. If I closed them but for a second, I was once more standing in the cellar, holding the candle above my head, and throwing its feeble rays upon Richard's prostrate form ; once more I lifted him up, once more convinced myself that his life had fled for ever !

"These spectral fancies faded as the night melted away, only to give place to as terrible realities. I remained in my room beyond my usual hour in order that Mrs Morden should find the letter that I had caused Richard to write, and which I had left upon the parlour-table. What moments of agony, remorse, suspense, were those ! In the end I had to find it for myself, to counterfeit surprise at its contents, and even to simulate annoyance and irritation. And here circumstances assisted me greatly, for, without any violation of probability in conduct, I was enabled to cause the cellar-door to be bricked up, thus placing the discovery of Richard's fate at an indefinite distance. Every hour that elapsed after the tidings of his disappearance had once got abroad placed me on safer ground. I had only to wait long enough, and the mysterious incident would become, I knew, a mere legend, save to two persons—to me and to you. I listened with interest to the ideas and suggestions of others upon the subject, with the view of shaping my own opinions—or, rather, the expression of them—in conformity with theirs.

"But there was one person only whose suspicions I had

the least cause to fear, namely, Dennis Blake. I knew, of course, that Richard had seen him subsequently to our first interview upon that fatal night : it was probable that he had told him of the promise I had exacted from him, and also—when he found that I was powerless to punish him—had expressed his determination not to fulfil it : he had probably even left Blake's house with the avowed intention of returning to Rosebank that very morning and defying me. In that case, Blake would have good reason, indeed, to disbelieve my story ; and so, in fact, it turned out. But, on the other hand, Blake, who had stripped Richard of his last shilling, including the cheque for a hundred pounds I had given him at his departure, had reasons of his own for denying that his friend had visited him on the night in question ; while, much as he hated me, it never entered into his mind that I had harmed my brother.

"It so happened, therefore, that on the only side on which there appeared to be danger I was made secure. Fortune had thus befriended me in two particulars, but only so far as she may be said to befriend, by gifts of land and gold, a man who has some incurable ulcer, and who would give all he had in the world, and all that he will ever acquire, only to be whole and well. First, I had placed a wall of bricks between my dead brother and the prying eyes of my fellow-creatures ; but it was a wall of glass to me, and a hundred times a day I had to look through it : a frightful penance, and, moreover, one which was utterly unavailing to wipe out the sense of my offence. Secondly, accident had silenced my only possible accuser ; but there was a voice within me that could not be silenced, and which day and night cried out incessantly against me as a man-slayer who was scheming to stand in his victim's shoes ! It lied, for I was not scheming. I had hopes—for how could I have

existed without them? or, rather, faint gleams of hope—since it was now apparent that you regarded me with respect—that you might in time accept me for your husband; but I shrank from moving a finger to advance them. When your father fell ill I assisted him, and strove, secretly, to assist you; but that I would have done, Heaven knows, had my brother been alive, and you his wife. I never breathed a word, nor cast a look—you will bear me witness, Maggie—that would lead you to imagine the existence of the passion which was devouring me; for I loved you, Maggie, now that I was free to win you, more vehemently than ever; and when Remorse and Shame forgot to gnaw their prey, I was tortured with the flames of vain Desire.

“It was with no thought of earning your gratitude that I chastised Dennis Blake for slandering you; I struck him down in the heat of passion, as I would have struck down any other man who dared to sully your fair fame. If I had had time to think, I might have held my hand, not because that blow made the only man who had power to harm me my deadly enemy, but because a public quarrel upon your account would, I knew, be the very last thing to recommend me to you. Indeed, when people began to whisper that I had been your champion with interested motives, I felt that it had been fatal to my hopes. From that time I avoided you, and kept at home—great Heaven, what a home it was!—and had you yourself not come to Rosebank, and given me the opportunity of declaring my passion, it would never, I verily believe, have been revealed. Oh, Maggie! how little you thought, as you listened to my pleading, what it was that made my air and looks so strange and unlike a lover’s—what a ghastly obstacle intruded itself between my eyes and your fair face—what a dreadful Something was lying beneath our very feet!



"Pardon me, pardon me, Maggie ; think of the wretchedness I suffered then, and afterwards, and (if I live to feel) what I suffer now. It was cruel to you, I own—most cruel : but I thought that you would never know, and you had become the only thing on earth for which I lived."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

RETRIBUTION

HAD Maggie listened to her dead husband's prayer, and pardoned him, or had she not? Her tears had ceased; his confession lay on her knee unnoticed, and she was staring at the wintry landscape out of doors. Presently she caught sight of the child, still intent on his book upon the floor, and snatched him up, and placed him on a chair, and the volume on a table before him. Whenever her eyes fell upon the floor, she shivered; yet she forced them to look upon it, and, after a while, prevailed over her weakness. She sat for many a minute deep in thought, and then, with a long-drawn sigh, resumed her task.

"Well, we were married: the dream of my past existence became a reality to me; and I was happy. You are surprised to read that word; but then you do not know—how should you, who set your affections where you did?—what it is to love a being, to possess whom, so far from dissolving an illusion, is a new enchantment. I was so happy that a new source of disquiet arose within me, a terror lest my happiness should not last—lest the fatal day of discovery (which has since arrived) should dawn, and destroy it for ever! I resolved to neglect no precaution against this peril. Since our honeymoon itself had been spent at home, rumour might be supposed to have exhausted itself respecting my unwillingness to leave Rosebank; and I resolved never to quit it even



for a day. That any one in my absence should break down the cellar-wall was in the highest degree unlikely ; but I would run no risks, however small. If you had wished it, indeed, I would have gone anywhere, since to have given you pleasure was a delight I could not have denied myself, no matter at what cost ; but, fortunately, you did not wish it. You were content to remain at home, and I was more than content ; for wherever you were was paradise ! The remembrance of what had happened to Richard had begun to fade even with myself—to recur at longer intervals and with less of force—so that I almost hoped it would be possible in time to forget it ; when suddenly you began to talk to me about his disappearance, a subject which had hitherto, as if by common consent, been avoided by us both. Then I felt, indeed, how delusive had been that hope of my forgetting. The mention of my brother's name by the lips that had once avowed your love for him, brought every detail of that fatal act to my recollection, and I beheld it while you spoke. It seemed to have occurred but yesterday, and that the discovery of it might be made to-morrow. Above all, the sense that my brother's whitening bones lay beneath our feet, while I was listening to your talk about him, palsied my tongue, and filled my soul with horror. So intolerable, indeed, were my emotions in that scene and atmosphere, that I was compelled to retire from them, and our conversation—as you remember—was continued in the garden. To my extreme disquiet, I then discovered that you believed Richard to have met his end by foul play, and that your suspicions rested upon Blake. I combated them as stoutly as I could—for who could be so convinced of his innocence as I—and for the better defence of him, endeavoured to convince you that my brother was still alive. This line of argument, however, had an effect natural enough, but which, in my own certainty of his death, I had forgot to calculate upon : you became intensely soli-

citous as to his whereabouts and well-being, and insisted upon writing to New York. You read your letter to me in the parlour, and I had to listen there to the gracious words that I alone, of all men, knew that his eyes would never read ; to the questions that I alone, of living men, could answer : and he, all the time, to whom they were addressed, lying so near at hand—so near, and yet so far !

"I greatly wonder, when the reply from New York reached us, that my indifference to its arrival did not create the suspicion that I must possess the knowledge that Richard was no more. Of course I knew that the envelope could contain only your own letter, and something revolted within me against affecting to believe that it could be a communication from the man that I had slain (although by misadventure) with my own hand. However, that incident passed away without any serious effect upon you ; indeed, having done your best to pierce the mystery of Richard's disappearance, your solicitude about him seemed to relax, and once more tranquillity began to gather about my life, like mosses about a stone. Indeed, I was even happier than before, for the blessed sense that my devotion was slowly but surely winning its reward from you—a reward it had never counted upon, for all the service of my life was yours, at all events—began to dawn upon me with an inexpressible brightness. I thought, poor fool ! that I had been forgiven all, and was henceforth to be blessed always.

"I have said that even yet, when you spoke to me of Richard, I was at once suddenly awakened from my dreams of happiness, and brought face to face with ruin ; imagine, then, my horror when, after weeks of silence concerning him, during which I had well-nigh forgotten that his unburied bones lay beneath our very roof, I was awakened by that noise in the cellar : there is a verse in the Scripture which describes how fear came upon a man who beheld some dread

vision of the night—‘a trembling which made all his bones to shake : a spirit passed before his face, and the hair of his flesh stood up ;’ and such was my case when I heard that sound ; only, in place of a spirit, I beheld Richard as I had left him, dead. He had been lying with that cellar for his grave for more than two years, and now he had risen to denounce me ! Such was my terror-stricken thought, when you, too, Maggie, were awakened by the noise, and questioned me about it. I had been too terrified to move until you spoke, but the sound of your voice at once inspired me with the courage of desperation. The fear of beholding Richard’s ghost was overcome by the greater fear of exciting your suspicions of what made me afraid, which might result in losing *you*. I resolved, if the noise should come again, that I would force myself to arise and face its cause ; but as it happened, it came no more on that occasion ; and in the morning early, I went down, and removed the great picture in the parlour from its nail, and made pretence that it had fallen in the night, and that the noise of its fall was what had disturbed us. The next night, however, we were roused again, and this time a sort of fury seized me, that did not admit of fear, and I arose and ran out of doors, and looking through the cellar-grating, saw a light and heard the strokes of a pickaxe ; and guessing from whence they came, I went to the woodhouse, and through the subterranean passage, and came upon Dennis Blake at the very moment when he had found my secret out. How he came to discover it you must needs know by this time, for he has done his worst, I know, whatever that may be ; so I need not speak of that. For one single instant, when I beheld him standing in the cellar with the light of the lantern thrown upon my brother’s body, and already, as I felt, master of my future life, by whose permission alone I might live on, and at whose word I might be parted from what was dearer far than life, *yourself*, the

temptation was strong upon me to become a murderer indeed. He read it in my face, and stood upon his guard with his pickaxe, crying, 'One is enough, John Milbank; you shall not kill me, as you have killed your brother.' It was a perilous speech for him; but I thought of you, Maggie, who, since you were my wife, must needs be disgraced by any crime of mine, and I let him live to be my Tyrant. After that, I was not only powerless in his hands, but I had no force even of my own, either without or within. The whole edifice of my life had fallen—from such a height too; for had I not become convinced you loved me!—and was shattered to atoms. Name and fame, present means and future gains, my home and hearth—all lay at this villain's pleasure. Above all, your happiness was in his power, and by one word of his could be utterly destroyed. All this, too, had occurred at a moment when I had imagined myself quite secure, as safe from the law as my conscience was void of the guilt which the law would now impute to me. I saw myself torn from your arms to the prison, or perhaps even the gallows; at all events, from your arms for ever. Can you wonder, Maggie, that, in the supreme agony of that moment (though I knew it not until you had yourself perceived it), I became an old man before my time—that the winter that had fallen on my heart in its midsummer, and withered it, turned my hair to snow!

"Blake comprehended my position only too well, and pushed his advantage to the uttermost. If I could only have gained time, could have persuaded him to leave the house, and return at daylight, I would have removed Richard's body, buried it elsewhere, and defied him to say his worst of me; but he was too cunning to accede to any such proposal. I told him the whole truth of how my brother had come by his end, just as I have told you, except (you may be sure) that I never breathed your sacred name to him; and I verily

believe that I convinced him. But he only shrugged his shoulders, and observed coldly that whether my brother had been murdered or not was a matter which in no way affected the terms he was about to dictate to me as the price of his silence. It might be a satisfaction to my own conscience to believe that the affair had been an accident: perhaps it was so, though he must say the circumstances were very suspicious—so suspicious, indeed, that there was no doubt as to the view which the law would take of the case, if once it should have cognisance of it. It was for our common interest, however, he said, that the matter should be kept secret, and he could keep a secret, if it was made worth his while. Thus he went on, as we stood together in the parlour that dreadful night, while I searched my mind in vain for schemes of safety. He had, in fact, even a stronger hold on me than he supposed. If once I was denounced, even though the law should acquit me, a greater punishment than the worst it could have inflicted would be mine, since I knew you would never more abide with one who had shed Richard's blood. In my utter hopelessness and despair, I even stooped to the humiliation of appealing to the villain's mercy—the mercy of Dennis Blake! Whereupon, he plainly told me that he had no such commodity for any man whose interests were antagonistic to his own, but least of all for me. There was no love lost, said he, between him and any of his fellow-creatures, but that he hated one man worse than all the rest, and that man was John Milbank. When that mark on his forehead—they had told him in the hospital he must needs carry it to his grave—was worn out, he might perhaps forgive the hand that caused it, but not till then; so I had best leave mercy out of the question. Then he proceeded to state the price of his silence and of my ransom; of which, let it suffice to say, since he will never profit by it by one farthing, that it was but little short of utter ruin.

"During all this time, I had still the thought that he would leave me before daylight, when I might secretly put away the evidence of that seeming crime, upon which alone he based his power over me. Cruel, therefore, as his terms were, I professed to accept them, and looked to see him thereupon depart.

"'But, my friend, we have not got this down in your handwriting!' said he grimly.

"'What matters!' said I. 'It is not difficult to remember what you have left to me, and, therefore, what you have exacted; and to put such an agreement on paper, though more perilous, would not be more binding than in words.'

"'That is true; but I was not referring to the agreement at all, which, as you say, is safe enough. What I want is an acknowledgment of the circumstance that has happened to-night—the finding of your brother's body in the cellar, and so on. You may explain how it came there as you please.'

"Then my heart sank within me, indeed—for what he demanded was, in fact, nothing less than a confession; and, if once possessed of that, he was my master, indeed, for ever! Then suddenly a thought, which at the time seemed to have winged its way from Heaven itself, flashed on my brain. In obedience to his request, I got out some paper from my desk, but contrived (and my agitation and excitement must have rendered the accident natural enough) to upset the ink.

"'You must have ink elsewhere,' said he sternly.

"'Yes,' said I, 'there is some upstairs: I will fetch it.'

"I resolved to write out what he required in the ink invented by your father, and trust to its virtues to make me once more a free man. I came up to your room, as you remember, and you gave me a bottle. What you must have thought of such a demand, at such a time, I cannot guess; my whole mind was intent on getting that villain from under our roof, and, meanwhile, could apply itself to nothing else. I wrote out what he wanted; and when he had read it over

carefully, he nodded approval, and put it in his pocket. He asked me for fifty pounds—just as one asks the banker with whom one has a balance to cash a cheque—and saying that that would do for the next ten days, when he would call again, and when I must be ready with a good lump sum, he left me.”

CHAPTER XL.

NEW YEAR'S EVE.

"I CREEPT up to my room, I know not how, and lay down by your side, wife, but feeling as though half the world were already between us. It was too near the break of dawn to admit of my removing the cause of my ruin from where it lay ; and once more it ceaselessly presented itself before my eyes, not as I had seen it, but even in more hideous shape—endowed with a ghastly life, and pointing to me with outstretched arm, as though denouncing me—as, indeed, it had done—as a murderer ! Your proposal that I should keep my room for a time, by reason of the change in my appearance, was not displeasing to me ; for I felt that every face that looked on mine must read my secret in it, and even your own dear presence was insupportable to me. I longed for night to come, that I might go about the dreadful work that I had set myself to do. As to telling you one syllable of what had happened, that was impossible ; to have mentioned Dennis Blake would at once, I knew, have turned your thoughts to Richard, and then—I did not dare to think what then ! I swear to you that, sooner than confront the idea of losing you, I preferred that my mind should keep company with that other haunting image—my dead brother. Oh, how could that wise writer whom we once read together have said, 'There are possibilities which our minds shrink from too completely for us to fear them !' I shrank, indeed, from this one, but it was because

I feared it, as the wicked on their deathbed fear the grave. The day came to its end at last ; and in the night—while you slept fast, outworn, I doubt not, with anxieties and fears, yet spared as yet from knowing what I knew—I rose, and went out to the tool-house, and, by the passage that Blake had made, into the cellar. Had ever man, I wonder, since the earth was made, so dreadful a task to do in it as I had ? Yet I did it. I took Richard's body away—what horrors are hidden beneath those common words !—and buried it—no matter where : where it will not be found till earth gives up its dead. That done, I had some hopes of safety, and could think a little, and with calmness. If only the ink in which I had written my own accusation should perform its office, there was now but Blake's bare word to hurt me—his against mine : the word of a cheat and scoundrel against an honest man's. In that appalling hour, a tale of which you had once spoken to me recurred to my mind—for nothing that you ever said have I forgotten—respecting one who, being made captive by a savage tribe, was doomed to death, unless, as he had foretold, the Great Spirit should interfere on his behalf with some prodigy upon the fatal day. An eclipse had been predicted for that date in a penny almanac which he chanced to have about him, and to that event—whether calculated by science, or merely the haphazard guess of some empiric, he knew not—the prisoner had to trust. As it happened, the thing took place, and he was saved. And this was now my case, except that I had better reason to believe in the seeming miracle. In ten days' time, when that villain came again, he might find me free.

“ I need not tell you, Maggie, how this poor hope was put to flight by your own innocent hands : how you tracked me in the garden, out of pure love and duty—as I went to lay my spade and pickaxe by, and then confronted me in the house—still for my good, sweetheart !—with the charge of compassing the death of Dennis Blake. I had no thought of

harming him, yet it was better to let you think I had, than that you should hear the truth : yet even the truth must now be but a little way off, I knew. Now I had owned that : meant to kill him, you must needs believe Blake when he told his tale—for if it was not true, why should I have sought his life? I could no longer defy him, so far as *you* were concerned, though I might defy the law ; and what was this small gain as compared with that huge loss ! Even though acquitted by others, I could not stay to read repugnance and abhorrence in your eyes ; I do not say the conviction of my guilt, for I have proved my innocence : still, I did kill him."

Ay ! there was the blot : Maggie could have forgiven all that—nay, even that itself, perchance, but could have forgotten it never. It was well in him to have left her ; she confessed she could never have taken that hand in hers again which had struck Richard down and slain him. Yet was not John dead too, and in a manner also slain ; and did not *his* blood also cry out for justice, the justice she alone could give it ! She read on.

"I did not dare to say good-bye to you, Maggie : my heart would have burst asunder, and I should have perished at your feet—a guilty man, as you must then have needs believed. I resolved to write all my story out, and then to leave home before the dawn—I cared not whither. It was an easy task for I had conned it a thousand times ; and here it is. Whatever steps he takes, no harm can befall you now from Dennis Blake. If, however, my departure has caused him to return to Rosebank before the appointed day, and to reveal to you what he knows, then it must needs be that he has convinced you. Thence it is that I shall write upon this paper : To be read when I am dead, or *when you have lost your faith in me*. It will be no blame to you if you have done so, dearest ; yet you will now have read the explanation, point by point, of all the

happened, and the whole story of my wretched life. I hope and pray that before it meets your eyes I shall be dead, since, being dead, my tale will be more like to move your soul to pity and forgiveness. Oh, think not how I have sinned, but how I have suffered!—that many a time I could have slain myself, but for the thought that loss of life was loss of you ; that I would do so now, but for the word I gave, which, being passed to you, is sacred and inviolable ! I have sinned, I know—a sin that may, indeed, be even unpardonable, since it was committed against yourself. It was base and selfish in me, when Richard had perished as he did, to suffer you to wed me : so much of guilt I own to ; for the rest, Heaven is my judge, and it is just !

“Forget me, darling!—O Maggie, Maggie ! to think that I should live to utter such a prayer!—forget me : that is the best that I can wish for you !”

Those were his last words ; so ended the sad story of John Milbank's life. “Forget me,” to the woman he had lived for, died for ! Never yet, perhaps, has the woman existed who could have forgotten under the like circumstances ; or, if such has existed, it was not Maggie. She had forgiven him all that was hers to forgive him—his trespass against herself ; yet she would never forget him, or cease to honour his unhappy memory. What touched her most of all was his humility—his taking it for granted that she would have made no sacrifices to rescue his name from shame. He had not stated what cruel terms had been imposed upon him by Blake, “since he will never profit by them ;” and again, “No harm can befall you now through Dennis Blake.” He had supposed that anything that villain could have said against himself, or caused others to say, would be of “no harm” to her. At how low a rate had he been content to count her love for *him*, while lavishing on *her* the treasures of his heart's devotion ! That

she could never have lived with him after she had come to the knowledge of what had happened to Richard, she admitted to herself even now ; but she confessed her husband's worth.

She recognised, without flinching, what manner of man he had been on whom she had thrown away her love in youth, and what manner of man was *this* one. She wondered, with him, how she could have clung to such a worthless weed, while this flower of manhood was pining for her ; how the devotion of the one could have counted for so little, and the admiration of the other for so much : but she had gained her wisdom at the cost of both their lives.

One thought alone gave her comfort : she had opened the packet because she knew that he was dead, not because she had lost faith in him. She had felt all along, notwithstanding Blake's statement, and many a fact more or less in corroboration of it, that, somehow or other, her husband would be proved guiltless—that he was incapable of guilt—and she rejoiced that her conviction had been independent of this proof. She had never lost faith in him ; but she had it now more strongly than she ever had ; she believed his tale, she pitied him, and she loved him.

"What dat, *mamma* ; Granny's hair ?"

Little Willie, tired at last with his picture-book, had been watching her as she broke the seal of the little packet that the ship-captain had sent to her containing the lock of hair cut from her dead husband's head.

She lifted the child on to her knees, and caressed him with inexpressible tenderness.

"No, darling," sighed she ; "it is not Granny's hair though it is white enough to be so."

How sharp must have been the agony that had blanched it what a memento of a wasted life it was ! He was gone out of the reach of her pity ; but, thank Heaven ! she had baffled his enemy, and his memory, untarnished by public disgrace

was still left to her to revere and honour. For its sake she felt that she could still do much, could battle for it—if need were, and notwithstanding what her present victory had cost her—to the end. To one thing only she felt herself unequal—namely, to remain, even for a single night, beneath that dreadful roof. That very afternoon, therefore, when the early dusk had fallen, she put on cloak and bonnet, and, with the child, set forth to her father's house. The old man was overjoyed to see her; and her arrival seemed to him, as indeed it well might do, the most natural thing in the world.

"I am glad, dear Maggie, that you have come hither," said he tenderly, "and do not spend this wretched New Year's Eve alone at home."

"I have come to spend not only New Year's Eve with you," she answered, "but the new year, and all new years that God may please to send us; for I have no home now except the old one!"

CHAPTER XLI.

PERPLEXITIES.

It was one of the advantages consequent upon her having been "buried alive," as the Hilton folks had designated her quiet married life, although they had owned John Milbank to be "the best of husbands," that Maggie was not now pestered with those conventional calls of sympathy and shallow expressions of condolence which so often add a new trouble to the sense of bereavement. "Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbour's house, lest he be weary of thee," was an injunction written surely with especial reverence to those would-be comforters, who at such times disturb with well-meant commonplaces our thoughts of Death and Loss. In Maggie's case, such visitors would have been an infliction indeed, and something worse, since itching ears and prying eyes were sources of positive danger. Her husband's secret had been preserved so far, but it was by no means secure; and it behoved her still to be on her guard, and wary with her tongue, in reply to all questions concerning him. The few persons, however, whose intimacy permitted of their visiting her, loved her too well, or respected her grief too much, to indulge their curiosity upon that subject. Her father, reticent by nature, was too glad to find his daughter once more making her home beneath his roof, to pry into the causes which had induced her to leave her own; and, indeed, it seemed natural enough that Rosebank, with its now doubly sad and mysterious asso-

ciations, should be distasteful to her. It had, in fact, become so hateful to her, that if she had not been absolutely obliged to do so, for business reasons, she would probably never have set foot in it again. It was arranged that it was to be let unfurnished, this method of disposing of it appearing to her upon the whole as the safer—the less likely to give a handle to Rumour, than the dismantling of the place, and letting it go to ruin, as she would otherwise have preferred to do. Even as it was, certain precautions had to be taken, the consideration of which pressed upon her with urgency. The existence of the underground passage between the tool-house and the cottage was as yet unknown save to two persons beside herself, and one of them bound in heavy recognisances to keep it secret. But when the house should become occupied by another tenant, the fact must necessarily be discovered, and made public, to form the groundwork of a hundred surmises and suggestions, all more or less perilous, and one of which, though by haphazard, might be fatal. It was essential, therefore secretly to remove the traces of Dennis Blake's burglarious entry into the cellar; and in order to accomplish this, she sought the aid of the only other man who was already acquainted with the fact, and to whom she was already indebted for her present security—namely, Mr Inspector Brain.

It was dangerous, for she was not without an uneasy suspicion that that astute officer was not so thoroughly convinced of the falsehood of Blake's story as he had affected to be; but no alternative presented itself. He was the only man who *could* help her. Moreover, if he had done her so good a turn out of pity for her miserable condition, as well as because the weight of evidence had lain upon her side, that consideration would weigh with him still. After long cogitation, she accordingly sent for him to her father's house.

"Mr Brain," said she, "I have purposely hitherto forborne

to express to you my sense of the infinite service you have rendered to me and mine, in the hope that my poor husband would himself return to suitably acknowledge it. That hope is now destroyed."

Here she broke down, not by design, as some women would have done, but because it was almost the first time that she had given utterance to any word respecting the dead man.

"Pray, pray, don't mention it! I beg you not to distress yourself; your taking on so, madam, cannot but be most injurious to your health," urged the polite inspector. Perhaps he *had* entertained the idea in private that there was really something more "fishy" about that Rosebank affair than he had professed to believe. Under that tightly-fitting professional costume he wore, indeed, a very warm heart—hard and resolute against scoundrels of all kinds, but tender towards lovely women in distress. It is not an exceptional state of things by any means. The very last time that a beautiful murderess was brought from Ultima Thule (or thereabouts) to the metropolis by a sergeant of police, it is on record that that official, notwithstanding that he was of mature age and a married man, was so wrought upon by the charms of his prisoner, that, though faithful to his trust, he cut his own throat when that fair lady was eventually *sus. per coll.*, through remorse at having been the means of her capture: and Maggie, who was no murderess, nor the wife of one—for Mr Brain, it must be mentioned in fairness to his integrity, never thought *that*—was very beautiful, and her woes had without doubt touched the inspector nearly.

They did not now touch him less, as she sat before him in her widow's weeds, not sobbing with passionate vehemence (as he could bear to see women do, or he could never have won his inspectorship, or done a day's duty), but dropping the silent tears which she would fain have restrained, and for which she seemed, as it were, to apologise. She was

"a lady every inch of her," as he afterwards confidentially affirmed, and knew how to treat a man with courtesy, without offering him something to drink.

"If I have never spoken of recompense, Mr Brain," she went on, "it was, believe me, through the fear of offending you, and also lest such an offer should afford the least suggestion of a bribe."

The inspector turned scarlet; his conscience, in matters of duty, was tolerably sensitive, and perhaps, as we have said, it was slightly pricked; but here the natural delicacy of Maggie's character, shown in her embarrassed looks and tone, stood her in better stead with him than the perfection of art could have done; it was so evident that she was feeling pain upon his account, not fear upon her own.

Mr Brain felt that it was a moment when discipline must be maintained, or that it would be all over with him. "I only did my duty, madam," observed he gruffly.

"I know it, Mr Brain, and I am only about to do what I feel to be mine. It is not unusual, as I understand, for private persons to recompense gentlemen of your calling for your professional services; and though I feel that any pecuniary payment will still leave me your debtor as regards the kindness and consideration you have shown to one in my unfortunate position, you must allow me to acknowledge it so far as I can. But for your prompt and sagacious behaviour with respect to Blake, my husband's memory might at this moment be stained with a charge as foul as false—the murder of a brother for whom, as I well know, he has made, through life, enormous sacrifices, and against whom he has never imagined evil. Such a service to me is priceless, and but ill represented by this note for fifty pounds. The acceptance of it, I need not say, leaves you perfectly free to take any further steps which your duty may suggest to you; it is but a recognition of the past."

"It is a pretty tidy sum, madam," remonstrated Mr Brain. "Why, a ten-pun' note would have been handsome."

"I am sure you will not distress me, Mr Brain, by rejecting it. However, if you think yourself overpaid, you can still further assist me, if you will. I have sent for you to-day, I own, not wholly to give myself this pleasure ; I need your help to conclude the matter which you have wrought thus far so successfully. If the existence of that underground passage to the cellar at Rosebank should come to be known—as it needs must be when the house is let—it will set gossiping tongues at work, which Blake's malice may easily render mischievous. Is it not possible to employ some trustworthy person—not belonging to this part of the country"—

"Certainly, certainly, madam," interrupted the inspector secretly relieved, perhaps, at the nature of her demand, which was after all, only the completion of the service he had already performed. "I can send for a bricklayer from London, who will close the tunnel at both ends, do the job thoroughly in a couple of hours, and never ask the reason why."

"If you will cause that to be done," said Maggie quietly "so soon as I have taken measures, by getting the servant out of the way, for its being accomplished privately, and will be so good as to let me know the cost, you will be conferring an obligation on me only second to that I have already incurred."

The request was reasonable enough, since all that had hitherto been done to baffle Blake might become mere loss of time and trouble unless it were granted ; but, nevertheless the inspector hesitated ; the proposition, now that he came to reflect upon it, involved such an absolute partisanship in the matter, made him so art and part in it, that he could not help asking himself, "If there really is anything wrong in this Rosebank job, shall not I, Inspector Brain, become an accessory in it after the fact by obliging this good lady ?"

Maggie read his thoughts almost as quickly as they flashed upon him.

"If it is going beyond your duties, Mr Brain, I beg you not to stretch them upon my account. If you will only give me the address of the workman upon whom you said you can rely, and even that in confidence"——

"Very good, ma'am ; yes, you can write it down at once, if you please : it is best not to put my hand to it ; for, like your husband, I have enemies of my own, who would be glad to have an opportunity to do me an ill turn in the force ; and you needn't tell this man that it was I who recommended you ; be so good as to say it was a friend."

"And it *was* a friend, I am sure," said Maggie earnestly, with a smile that shot right home to the inspector's heart. He felt himself a brute to have experienced any scruples in obliging her ; and something worse to have suspected her to be connected, however remotely, with a crime. So this arrangement was put into effect, and so far as Rosebank was concerned, Maggie felt secure. One possibility, however, never ceased to haunt her, that somehow, some day, the remains of the unhappy Richard should be discovered and identified. Where John had buried them, she knew not ; but she had seen him that night, with his spade, come from the direction of the spinney, and in it she pictured to herself their unhallowed resting-place. It could not have been very deep, for it was winter-time, and the ground like iron ; and was it not certain that one day, perhaps soon, perhaps after the lapse of years, the terrible secret should be laid bare, notwithstanding all her precautions ! Nay, if such should be the case, and Mr Brain should be alive when the discovery was made, would not those very precautions be, to his mind, the proof of her husband's guilt, and of her own conviction of it ! And if, on the other hand, the inspector should die, would not Dennis Blake, now doubly made her foe, be once more at liberty to

prey upon her fears, and, by instituting an investigation on his own account, to make his power felt indeed ! As soon as one source of danger was done away, in short, poor Maggie became the victim of new apprehensions, which, it seemed, were never to end until all should be revealed ; there would be no further cause of fear to her, only because the worst that could befall had happened. The criminal, she had read, is never secure ; and she, who was neither criminal nor cognisant of any crime, was doomed, it appeared, like him, to dwell in the constant dread of discovery. Her very faith would, at times, faint and fail beneath this load of care ; for, could the government of the world be just, she asked herself, when the innocent was thus made to suffer like the guilty ? Nay, how could she reconcile with justice the whole tenor of her unhappy husband's blameless life, nourished as it had been upon vain hopes, that had had their fruition only by an accident, which itself had overwhelmed him with ruin and despair ! How was it, how could it have been permitted, that the crime—nay, not the crime—that the impulse of a moment, should have brought the fruit of a well-spent life to nought, and withered such a goodly tree !

In vain she tried to comfort herself with the reflection that John was happy now at last, and compensated for his life of unrest and self-denial ; and that presently, in Heaven's good time, they would meet again, with this Shadow no more between them ! Maggie was a good woman, but it is given but to few mortals to have their convictions in the happy Future so firmly set as to outweigh the miserable Present. She even ventured to use the argument of comparison with respect to Richard. If all this wretchedness had not happened, would she not have had to endure other miseries, as bad, or almost as bad, as Richard's wife—the wife of a sot, a forger—and the worst of forgers, one who had made use of an innocent hand to perform his crime—faithless, dishonoured in her own eyes,



and perhaps successful in his threatened scheme of teaching her the vices to which he was himself the slave ! As Richard's wife, in short, might she not have been even as miserable as was his brother's widow ? An argument surely more creditable to our humanity than that which would extract consolation from a comparison with the misfortunes of *others* ; but yet one that failed to console her—for to experience consolation, one must at least feel that the catastrophe has happened, that Fate for that time (for, alas ! she is insatiable) has worked her utmost malice ; and not, as Maggie felt, that the worst was still impending. But for *that*, indeed, her father's devotion and little Willie's demands upon her loving service, might in time have won her from the past ; but from these dreadful possibilities of the future they could never win her. A thoughtless word, an idle question, could at any moment array them before her eyes ; and when even Martha Linch—whose perceptions of what sympathy demanded had been shown to be most delicate, and who had restrained that usually unruly member, her tongue, in connection with all that had happened, in a manner that the engraver had pronounced to be miraculous—asked one day to look at that lock of hair belonging to dear Mr John, which the captain had sent home, Maggie was overwhelmed with confusion. The hair was in a closed locket round her neck, but she mechanically placed her hand upon it, as though Martha's eyes could have pierced the gold. The idea, suggested to her by little Willie's remark, of pretending that what the locket contained was her father's hair, did indeed strike her ; but she rejected it, as likely to lead to contradiction and complications ; and she had absolutely nothing to say, save to refuse her companion's request. To have shown her the dear relic would necessarily have excited question and comment, for when Martha had last seen John, his hair was brown as the filbert ; and yet not to show it must have seemed a strange thing also. Luckily, Martha Linch,

being one who never took offence, but was always fearful of offending, was herself the apologist in this instance; but Maggie thought, with a shudder, how much worse might have been her difficulty had it occurred with some one else.

This was only one example of the perplexities of her unhappy position. It seemed that it must behove her to be ever on the watch lest her tongue should trip, ever wearing the shield upon her arm, to turn not only the shaft of malice, but the arrow, shot at a venture, from the defenceless memory of the dead. Worse than all, she felt herself chained to Hilton and the neighbourhood of the roof she most abhorred, for, in case any discovery should take place, how necessary was it that she should be on the spot, to stamp the first flicker of suspicion out, which else would grow and grow, like flame itself, till it defied all effort to subdue it.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE PLAN OF THE ESTATE.

OF all documents in which the mind of man is visible, there is none perhaps so significant of their writers as their will. All other indentures and agreements are more or less of a temporary nature, or may be abrogated by change of circumstances, but a man's will is his very last act of all, not to be made public till he has deceased, and become indifferent to the opinion of his fellow-creatures, and in it, therefore, he pleases himself alone, and shows his nature as it is. And thus John Milbank's will was proved to be the very reflex of his own disposition : clear, concise, decisive, without condition, or even suggestion, and, in short, the very opposite of what old Matthew Thurle's had been. It left (with the exception of a legacy to Mrs Morden, sufficient to provide for her future needs) his whole property unconditionally to "Margaret, his beloved wife." There was no mention of Richard's name in the document, but the impossibility of proving his demise was, after all, of little moment, since abundant proof was found among his brother's papers that he had become already indebted to John for more than the value of his share of the business that was nominally carried on in their joint names. So well had this prospered, however, since John had been relieved from the dead-weight of the other's idleness and the drain of his extravagances, that enough was left to leave Maggie handsomely provided for.

The Best of Husbands, it was remarked, had deserved his reputation even in that crucial particular in which so many excellent mates are found to fall short: it is not unusual to discover in his last testament the first evidence that a husband has any will of his own at all; and it sometimes turns out to be a pretty strong one. But John Milbank had been consistent to the last; his conduct in the matter was generally approved of—certainly by the ladies—more than any other feature in his career: and it was assumed that Maggie Thorne, in rejecting Thomas Idle in favour of Francis Goodchild, had shown she knew upon which side her bread was buttered. That the furniture of Rosebank was within a few months disposed of without reserve, did not surprise these gossips: they did not give the widow much credit for sentiment with respect to domestic associations; but what did excite their wonder was, why, “with all that money,” she should be content to still live on in the house which had sufficed for her home when she had toiled for daily bread! In Mitchell Street, however, she remained, and in it her father still followed his old pursuits, not, of course, from necessity, but because they were a labour of love. In the same little arbour in that humble garden on the leads, in which, but four years ago, she had accepted Richard Milbank as her future husband, she was sitting one summer morning, when Mr Linch called in to say that a purchaser had at last been found for Rosebank. Though she had expected, and even wished for this announcement, it gave her a momentary thrill of fear; nothing, indeed, remained to be discovered there, while its continuance upon her hands was, of course, a considerable pecuniary loss; and yet to part with it seemed like giving up a sacred trust.

“The party proposes to take the whole estate,” said Mr Linch, “so that you will have no further trouble about it: that spinney, and the gravel-pit, let me tell you, have hitherto



been sadly in our way—— But there, I daresay you did not even know that you were possessed of those undesirable properties.”

“Yes ; I knew it,” said Maggie faintly, for the mention of the spinney had turned her sick at heart. Supposing this new tenant should proceed to grub it up, instead of merely disposing of the brushwood, as old Matthew Thurle had done, and her husband after him, what might not be brought to light !

“Well, at all events, I have brought you the plan of the estate, with every feature of it indicated, so that you may know exactly what you are going to part with.”

“Perhaps I shall not part with it,” said Maggie quietly, taking the plan, which he had unrolled, from his hands, and regarding it attentively, though more to conceal her own emotions than from any interest in the details.

“Not part with it, Mrs Milbank !” snapped the little lawyer. “Why, this is worse than anything I could have believed of the unbusiness ways of women ! It was at your own request, since you preferred to live in this den of a—— I mean, in this very inferior residence, rather than in your charming cottage, that I advertised the place for sale ; and now that I have, with great difficulty, secured a purchaser, and on terms, too, that, let me tell you, are, in my opinion, a fancy price, you say : ‘I shall not part with it,’ after all !”

“Nay ; I said ‘Perhaps,’ Mr Linch,” said Maggie with a forced smile. “Pray, give me a little time : let me have an hour or two to make up my mind about this matter.”

“But you have had plenty of time to do that already.”

“I know I have, Mr Linch ; and I daresay I appear very foolish”——

“Well, no, not foolish.” He was a plain-spoken man, and had shown himself to be so in old times to Maggie, on more than one occasion : but when one is addressing a well-

dowered young widow, one is bound to be more careful in one's choice of adjectives, than in speaking to a girl who has to earn her own living with her fingers. "I don't say foolish, but only a little unreasonable. However, I have business in this neighbourhood, and I'll call again in half-an-hour for your decision."

"Please to leave the plan with me."

"By all means, though I am afraid that will not help you much."

Whether it helped her or not, Maggie's eyes, so soon as she was alone, were riveted upon it. It was a well-executed document of the kind enough, with every object clearly marked out, and its name neatly printed over it. Every little hillock and depression was shadowed forth; woodland and meadow, and garden-ground, were each indicated the one from the other, Perhaps it reminded her of some of the work of her own hands, at the time it had been necessary for her to use them with similar deftness and particularity; but at all events, over this plan she pored, with thoughtful face, till Mr Linch returned. "Well," said he, not very graciously, "what is the last fancy, Mrs Milbank? Are we to hold or sell?"

"The fancy has gone, Mr Linch, if it ever existed," returned she; "you doubtless know best what ought to be done, and, therefore, I leave the matter in your hands."

"Then my advice, Mrs Milbank, is, to close with this offer at once; for we may wait long enough before we meet with such another one. Why, with this money, you can buy a place in some beautiful part of the country—anywhere would surely be better for your father and little Willie than this stifling house in Mitchell Street,—and 'live happy ever afterwards' as the story-books say; at all events, I have your consent to sell."

The lawyer then hurried away, lest his client should once more exhibit symptoms of change of purpose, filled with

philosophic reflections upon the incapability of even the most sensible of women for knowing their own minds.

Yet Maggie's apparent vacillation had not been without cause. She was ignorant of business, it is true, and had never experienced that interest in her own property which causes most men (though not all) to investigate it with such particularity. When her eyes, therefore, fell upon the plan of the Rosebank estate, she learnt for the first time that in the centre of that little wood which had so dread an interest for her was a limekiln; and as she read that word, a certain conviction had flashed upon her. She remembered that the spade which John had used that night, and which she had found in the tool-house, had been stained with whitish earth, which she now recognised for quicklime. Moreover, she called to mind John's expression respecting what he had put away, that "not until the earth gives up its dead," would it ever again be seen of men. Those words, she now reflected, ought to have sufficed her, since she had never known him to speak falsely in the least matter or in the greatest; but with this confirmation of them before her eyes, she felt indeed secure. What a sport of circumstances is our poor humanity! How immense the consequence to us that arises from what to others are trifles light as air! That night, a mere dot upon a map had given Maggie greater comfort than if she had been presented with the fee-simple of a county!

CHAPTER XLIII.

IN THE FOREST.

It is twelve years since the eligible offer, upon which Mr. Linch so congratulated his client, was made for Rosebank and accepted, and almost the same period since the widow John Milbank departed from Hilton, to take up her residence even its keenest gossips knew not where, except that it was far afield. The locality of her new home is, in fact, only known to two of her old neighbours, her lawyer and his sister. It is in the heart of the New Forest in Hampshire. The house is but little larger than the old cottage, with whose walls so many strange incidents have occurred, and like it, this summer evening, it shows like a bower of roses, thickly its garden planted with that flower. A verandah runs round its front, in which old Herbert Thorne is sitting in an invalid-chair, conversing in a low voice with one who is to us a stranger. The engraver is very feeble now, but his mind is still clear, and he enjoys existence as few men of his age can boast of doing. His companion, his junior by some ten years, and who is the clergyman of the parish, regards him from time to time with an interest that is evidently personal. For the most part he listens, while the other speaks.

"I attribute it mainly," says he, "to a temperate youth and a comparatively early marriage, and, especially, that my life has been unconnected with any startling occurrences.



has followed on so evenly, so wholly without incident or excitement, that I miss nothing the absence of which is wont to make old age so irksome. Above all, except at one time, when my first illness overtook me, I have never suffered from anxiety. I enjoy the inexpressible comfort—the want of which makes fathers old before their time—of knowing that when I am gone my dears ones will not have material cause to miss me. Maggie will regret her father, Willie his grandfather, but they will neither have to mourn their breadwinner. That is a great consolation, Mr Gresham, and I thank God for it. Willie's going to sea is my only trouble—nor would even that distress me—for it is better that the boy should have his way—were it not for his mother's sake."

The rector did not answer, save by a warning pressure of the old man's hand.

Two figures were slowly crossing the lawn in front of them, engaged in earnest converse—the one, a delicate-featured woman, dark and pale, of matured, but still exquisite beauty; and the other, a lad of fourteen or fifteen years, upon whose shoulder her arm lovingly rested. Rather under, than over the average height of boys of his own age, his frame was exceptionally sturdy and well-built; his bronzed, frank face, surmounted by brown, curling hair, showed the picture of health, but his eyes were now cast upon the ground in tender sorrow. It was no shame to his manliness that they were moist with the thought of his leaving his mother on the morrow for his first voyage. When her gaze was not fixed upon him, it rested not upon the glorious prospect of wooded vale and upland that lay immediately beneath them, the solitary, far-spreading oaks, the clumps of beech, the herds of deer amidst the fern, but wandered far to the horizon's verge, where glittered a silver streak, which was the sea.

"It was a natural wish, dear Willie," she is saying, "and I do not blame you for it; nor even would I have it other-

wise, if I could. There are fewer temptations to evil in a sailor's life, they say, than on land; you have a restless spirit, which never would be satisfied with a farmer's life, such as I, in my selfishness, would have chosen for you."

The young lad smiled. "*Your* selfishness, mother!" interrupted he and kissed her hand. The tone, the air, the manner, were the perfection of graceful tenderness and appreciation.

"How like, how like!" she murmured to herself, not as mothers who congratulate themselves upon their children's love, but with a sigh of bitter meaning. "Idleness, my darling," she went on, "does for none of us: it would teach even you in time to think of nothing but your own pleasures, and in them to forget those who have no pleasure save in you. Your nature—though do not think, Willie, that I wish it altered—is impressionable to a fault, and though it wrings my heart to lose you—and for so long, so long!—I feel that it is better that you should go."

"Am I like my father, mother?" asked the boy softly.

"Yes, oh yes!" she said.

"Yet not in disposition, surely, since I have heard grand-papa say that he was so quiet and steady, and not at all given to change."

"So he was dear," answered she hastily, and with a quick glance of terror at his downcast face. "I was speaking only of your looks. Shall we go to the hillock, and sit down awhile for the last time? I shall be there, Willie, once at least every day, until you come back again; and when the time comes round for your return, I shall be there all day, I do believe, and cheat myself with the hope that every homeward sail that passes is the one that will bring you to my arms! You will think of that, my boy, sometimes, and picture your poor mother there, will you not?"

They had crossed the lawn, and presently wound out of

sight to the spot she had indicated, a mound at some distance behind the house, which afforded the best view of the Southampton waters, and all that came and went upon that silent highway.

"That parting will almost break your daughter's heart," said the rector, continuing his conversation with the old engraver: "my wife is quite upset with the thoughts of it, upon her account; she would, nevertheless, have come to-night, of course, but that she thought it kinder to leave them alone together."

"Mrs Gresham is always kind, and knows what is best, whenever a kindness is to be done," said Mr Thorne. "Tomorrow, indeed, will be a bitter trial; Maggie insists upon going to the docks to see him off; and when the boy is gone, what a journey home, alone"——

"Nay, she will not be alone, you may be sure, Mr Thorne," interrupted the other gravely; "my companionship will indeed, I fear, be of little comfort, but she will certainly have *that*!"

"You are a good man, sir."

That was all the engraver said, or was capable of saying. He had borne up, as it was his nature to do, against the force of his own emotions, and was slow to exhibit them! but the departure of the boy who had been his companion from childhood did, in fact, affect him very nearly, and yet, he knew that he could not measure his daughter's sorrow by his own—that the morrow's parting, as the rector had said, would almost break Maggie's heart. The two men sat without a word, listening to the sounds of evening in that leafy world, and watching the round moon uprise and pour upon it her noiseless treasure; presently, the elder one dropped asleep, and his companion had left his chair, with the intention of taking silent farewell, when a startling sound fell upon his ear; it was faint, and came apparently from a long way off; but the rector

had served his time in a very different cure from that he now held in the quiet forest—in courts and alleys of a great city, where quarrels and shouts often made night hideous—and he recognised it at once as the cry of a woman in fear. Before the sound had died away, Mr Gresham was making his way in the direction from which it came, at a speed that would have astonished his parishioners to witness.

“The hillock” from which the cry proceeded was, with its rustic seat and single fir-tree, a very prominent object, and before he reached it he was the spectator of a curious scene. Besides the widow and her son, there appeared there a third person ; a man clothed in rags, and of so swarthy a complexion that the rector did not for a moment doubt him to be one of the numerous gipsies—ordinarily quite harmless, except for their poaching propensities—that haunted the forest ; from his gestures, this personage seemed to be addressing himself with vehemence to Mrs Milbank, when suddenly the boy sprang at his throat, like a dog upon a deer, and dragged him to the ground. Again the cry, this time unmistakably for help, rose from the widow's lips, and it was answered only just in time. The gipsy, overpowered by the unexpectedness of the attack of his young antagonist, rather than by its force, had already recovered himself, and holding the boy beneath him, was apparently about to kneel upon his throat, when the rector fell upon him, striking him from his victim by his sheer weight, with the power of a battering-ram, and rolling him down the hill. To follow was for the moment impossible ; the parson was somewhat stout and plethoric ; his exertions in running uphill had already “winded” him ; and before he regained his breath, the intruder had sprung to his feet and disappeared in the depths of the forest. The boy, indeed, flushed and furious, would have pursued his enemy ; but his mother had thrown her arms about him, and was beseeching him, in passionate accents, to remain where he was.



"Where on earth did that scoundrel spring from?" inquired the rector; "and what could have induced you, Willie, to fly at him, as I saw you do, like a wild-cat whose young has been shot?"

"He insulted my mother," answered the boy, with intense excitement. "If my foot had not slipped, he would never have got the upper-hand of me as he did. However, I will be even with him one day, for I shall know him anywhere, as he said he should know *me*."

Mr Gresham turned to Mrs Milbank for an explanation of the matter, which her son was evidently far too excited to give; but her answering glance at once exacted silence. Such a pleading, agonised look he had never beheld even on a death-bed. As they descended slowly to the cottage, Willie began, unasked, to give his version of the affair.

"My mother and I were sitting on the bench together, Mr Gresham, when that fellow suddenly stood before us: one might have thought he had dropped from the clouds, except that such a scoundrel must needs come from below, and not from above: 'And so I have tracked you two out at last,' he said. Then, of course, we knew he was a madman; and my poor mother shrieked out, as she well might. Then he went on with some wild talk, saying he should know me anywhere, for it was easy to see I was my father's child; and then—then something else, for which I will pay him, whether he be mad or not, if we ever meet again."

"Nay, Willie, but if he is mad," argued the rector, "he is not responsible for his words, any more than his actions. He is probably some gipsy whose brain has been set on fire by drink."

"Nay; he is no gipsy," said Willie positively.

"Well, perhaps he has escaped from some asylum; to-morrow I will cause a thorough search to be made, and the poor wretch secured, so that when your mother comes back

from Southampton she need have no further cause for fear. Your grandfather is, fortunately, asleep, and has heard nothing of this, and it will be just as well to say nothing about it, for fear of alarming him."

By these arguments, and a promise that, for the future, one of the rector's farm-servants should sleep at the cottage while Willie was at sea, the boy was pacified. And after a while, Mr Gresham took his leave.

In spite of the journey that lay before the widow on the morrow, and of the parting that awaited her, far more trying to her strength than any physical exertion, she never closed her eyes throughout that night. For the second time during her life, the bitter experience was borne in upon her that, when matters seem at their very worst, a worse than that worst is still behind. For years her existence had been peaceful, serene, secure; the secret that had at one time filled her with such misery and disquiet had become, to all seeming, absolutely safe, and indeed was so; her forest-life, passed in the companionship of the old man and the boy, was all that she desired; an evening calm, which, although premature, was inexpressibly welcome, had settled down upon her soul. Then, suddenly, Willie, who had been always so dutiful and gracious, though profiting but indifferently by the studies which Mr Gresham superintended, exhibited a passionate yearning for the profession of a sailor. She was too wise and too unselfish to show the pangs this cost her; but she knew that when he should have left her home, the sunbeam that lit it up for her would have gone out, and all within it would become cold and grey till his return. Her passion for his unworthy father, her tenderness and pity for her dead husband having lost their objects, had, as it seemed, concentrated themselves in one overwhelming affection for the orphan boy. To be about to lose him for years, perhaps for ever, had appeared to her to be the very cruellest shaft which Fate had in it



quiver ; but now she knew that it had another, barbed far worse, and tipped with poison. Dennis Blake, whom she had flattered herself his own excesses must long ago have destroyed, was alive, and had found out her present retreat—"tracked her out," as the wretch had said, which implied that he had discovered her by design. From his manner and appearance it was easy to understand that his fortunes were desperate, and that no exercise of Mr Inspector Brain's authority would now be of avail—even if, indeed, the lapse of time should have left him any power over him. It was true that Blake was at least equally powerless for any active harm ; but there was now another channel through which his malice might work evil, which even her apprehensions, when of old she had forecast her future, had omitted to calculate upon. Willie was now no child, as he had been then ; at present he believed implicitly that Maggie was his mother, and John Milbank his father ; but he was only too apt to listen to the arguments of others, and to be swayed by them. *And what if Blake should tell the boy who his father was, and who had killed him!*

At the idea of this, and of the consequences that must needs flow from it, poor Maggie's feelings experienced a complete inversion ; so far from bewailing Willie's going to sea, she rejoiced in it, since it would remove him from this man, and put him out of reach of his adder's tongue. That he was about to depart upon the morrow was now absolutely a source of congratulation. Would to Heaven that he had departed yesterday ! If she could only get him safe on board, without letting this man have further speech or sight of him, Maggie felt that she could still, once more, be almost happy.

CHAPTER XLIV.

EMANCIPATION.

WILLIE's ship, in which he is about to sail this evening for Southampton, is not "a king's ship:" the ambition of his adopted mother had not aspired for him so high as the royal navy, or perhaps she had flattered herself that his service under a private firm would be easier, and more open to opportunities in the shape of leave. But the boy was "middy" for all that, and had a right to wear that child-uniform of the sea which moves a woman's heart towards its wearer more than plumes and scarlet. How handsome he looked! How proud she felt of him that evening as she sat close to his side after dinner at the inn. His captain, with whom, notwithstanding her retiring habits, she had contrived to make acquaintance, in hopes to interest him in the boy—for will not a woman do in the way of "bother" or trouble in such a cause?—had given him leave up to the last moment, and there was still another hour before their parting. She sat with her hand in his, but spoke but little, for her heart was too full for speech. He was going from her for months, it might be for years, among strangers, and in a strange land, when he should be on land at all; and hitherto they had not been separated even for a day. He had been brought up at home, not indeed like a milksop, for he was athletic and manly beyond his age, but he had never left the atmosphere of love that surrounded him at the cottage, to breathe the outer air.



and now he was about to experience the rough side of life ; hardships, and rude companions, and temptations ; and she would not be by to cheer, console, or strengthen him. Such were the thoughts that gave to her full right to call herself his mother : there was nought of self pertaining to them. She did not picture to herself—at all events not now—the house all emptied of its mirth, to which she was about to go back ; or the long nights when the wind should be up and wild in the forest, and wilder on the sea, when she should lie awake, and listen and pray—perhaps in vain—for her darling's safety ; or the long days, which she should begin to count to-morrow, and which would grow longer as the time drew on for his return, if indeed he did return ; the eager lookings for a letter from the sea by every post ; the disappointments and delays ; the solitude and the evil that were to be. That these were all to come, she was indeed vaguely aware ; but for the present Willie, and Willie's future, were all in all to her. The incident of the previous night had given her strength up to this moment—it had made it seem so all-important to get the boy on board ship, and out of the risk of Blake's gaining speech with him—that all else had been forgotten, but now that he was safe, or all but safe, her grief became a burden such as she could hardly bear.

They had dined royally, or rather Willie and Mr Gresham had dined, while she had made pretence to do so, and the boy, looking forward into life with such expectation as is only possible to youth or madness, and flushed with the unaccustomed good cheer, was in high spirits. His being so at such a time would not have given her pain—for, with all her woman's love, she was in all things sensible—but that it reminded her of his father, from whom he had inherited his thoughtless buoyancy, his audacious independence, and then of the man himself—his father. Then once again the fear smote her—supposing between cup and lip there should be a slip still ;

supposing Blake had tracked them to Southampton, and should intercept them on their way to the ship. She was lying in the docks, more than half a mile away, and such a thing might happen yet. She knew it was a foolish thought, and strove to drive it from her, but it would intrude itself. When the chimes of the neighbouring church warned them that it was time to depart, it was with trembling steps that, still hand in hand with Willie, she descended the hotel-stairs, and entered the vehicle that was in waiting to take them to the docks. The light from the shop-windows—for it was now evening—flashed upon the gold about his cap, and made him very conspicuous; suddenly he felt his mother's fingers tighten about his own. "Quick, quick!" exclaimed she; "we are late: let us go quicker."

She had caught a glimpse of a slouching figure in the street, which had looked up at them as they passed with unmistakable and malicious recognition. She did not know that this figure was already running, though with vagrant and uncertain step, behind the carriage, but she knew enough to wish from the bottom of her heart that the boy was well aboard. Past the jetties with their waning lights, and by the water-side, where the rays from the ship-lanterns gleamed from their sterns, and quivered in the wave, to the dock-gates where a great crowd was gathered. It was long after the hour for closing, but some of these were passengers by the vessel about to sail, and some their friends, who wished to see the piteous last of them ere bidding them farewell; and some had no call at all to press within, but were merely curious to see the ship depart. The officials had work enough to keep back the crush, and decide as to who should be allowed to pass and who excluded even at the narrow footway which had hitherto alone offered admittance; but at this new arrival, when the larger entrance-gate had to be thrown open to admit the vehicle, their task became difficult indeed.



"Stop, stop that carriage!" cried a hoarse, half-stifled voice behind them, which went like ice to Maggie's heart; "I want to speak to"—

"Quick, quick!" cried she again. "That is the ship, driver;" and she stood up, and pointed out the spot, where, amid the comparative darkness of the docks, shone the light of the departing vessel. She knew its place and it, though she had visited it but once, as well as its own captain, and would behold it for many a day and night, when it should be thousands of miles away, with every spar and sail distinct as she had seen them that morning. Willie, boylike, wondered to see his mother "in such a fidget," when there was still time to spare; but he set it down, as he well might, to her disturbance and distress of mind upon his own account. Once again he folded her in his arms, before they reached the ship, where scoffing eyes might chill their last farewell; but though she passionately returned his embrace, her face was fixed upon the road behind them, striving to penetrate the gloom, and mark if they were followed by that slouching figure whose hateful tones were still ringing in her ears.

The quay, however, was reached by this time, where the departing vessel lay, and in it her precious charge was placed in safety.

"God bless you, my boy!" and "God bless *you*, mother!"—those simple words that are associated with so many a bitter hour of human life—were duly whispered; and then she tore herself away, and, with the rector beside her, silent and sympathising, watched from the shore the ropes cast off, the white sails belly in the night-breeze, and the huge ship slowly forge ahead with all her treasure.

"We had better wait a bit, sir," said the driver of the carriage; "there's a great crowd at the gates, they tell me, because of an accident that has happened."

"What accident?" asked Mr Gresham, not so much from

interest in the matter, as because this talk with the driver would leave his companion more completely to herself.

"Well, some drunken man, it seems, insisted on bursting in, just after we came through the gate; and not knowing his road, and being followed pretty sharp by the police, has come to grief—run right into the dock yonder."

"And was the poor fellow drowned?"

"Why, no, sir: that he scarcely could have been with so many folks about; but, unfortunately for him, the dock was dry at the time, and he fell a sheer forty feet or more, and was killed upon the spot. They're trying to find out whether anybody knows anything about him."

"I know him," exclaimed Maggie suddenly.

"You, my dear Mrs Milbank?"

"Yes; I noticed a person, who I believe to be this unhappy man, following us in the street: if it be so, I know who he is; I can identify him. It is my duty to do so, is it not? Then let me see him."

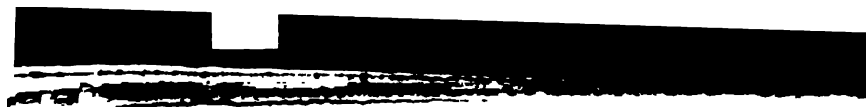
In vain the rector opposed her; she was resolute to tender her evidence, and she had her will. It was, as she had expected, nay, had hoped (how could it have been otherwise?—somebody was dead: then, surely, better that it should be he than any other); it was indeed the body of Denuis Blake, whose bruised and battered face seemed even in death to menace her. When she saw him lying thus, however, his sins beyond her judgment, she felt no anger against him more, we may be sure; but it was not in nature that she should not feel relief from fear—Emancipation.

When her boy came home, there would now be no human being that would have the will or power to sunder her and him; to bid him call her by any less loving name than mother; above all, to estrange him from her, as the wife of him who slew his father. Some explanation, indeed, was due to Mr Gresham, who had recognised the dead man for the intruder.



of the previous night, whom he had ejected from the hillock ; and she gave it, with certain reservations. A time came when she told all to him ; and a time, afterwards, when it could do no harm to tell it to the world, else it had not been written now. But why anticipate the inexorable years ! Let us rather dwell upon that happy hour when Willie came back from his first voyage, and leave him clasped in his mother's arms. With what devouring eyes she gazes on his sunburnt features, and runs her trembling fingers through his hair, and smoothes the down upon his smiling lip ! How eagerly her ears drink in his animated talk of tropic wonders ! With what mutual joy they two set out his store of far-brought presents—these for grandpapa, those for the Greshams, those for their friends at Hilton ! The boy has forgotten none ; least of all, the only woman whom, as yet, he loves—his mother, as, thank Heaven ! he deems her. Yes, Maggie is happy ; happier, on the whole, even when the boy is absent, and she and her old father pass uneventful forest days together ; happier than most women who, having thrown away their hearts upon such men as Richard Milbank on life's threshold, have to pay the penalty of their error to its close. The liability which she incurred thereby was heavy indeed, and at one time went nigh to break her ; but the debt is paid at last, and she is free.

THE END.









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